

## PROFILE: Dr Fiona Mulcahy, Aids consultant at St James' Hospital, Dublin

**A**LMOST four years ago, when Dr Fiona Mulcahy was appointed as Ireland's first and only consultant specialising in Aids, there were less than 30 cases of full-blown Aids and 680 HIV-infected people throughout the country. Today there are 174 Aids patients, 1005 HIV-infected people and 75 people have died because of the virus.

In her first year as a consultant at the Genito-Urinary clinic at St James Hospital in Dublin, which deals with all sexually-transmitted diseases including Aids, she treated between 150 to 200 HIV patients a week. At present, over 600 patients attend the clinic each week.

Yet despite the increasing incidence of the disease, the government has still not allocated a specific Aids budget and funding is minimal. Doctors, patients and Aids counsellors all agree that the clinic is coping only because of the sheer grit and determination of the 34-year-old consultant and her small staff.

"She's a woman who knows exactly what she's about. She knows what she wants in terms of service and she goes after it," said the National Aids co-ordinator, Dr James Walsh.

In order to employ the extra two full-time registrars and one shared registrar that the Aids workload required, she had to find alternative sources of funding. She raised money from the Aids Fund (of which she later became a Board member), from the Medical Research Council of Britain, (for her participation in researching AZT, the drug which has had a considerable degree of success in delaying the onset of full-blown Aids) and from other donations. St James Hospital has had to pay for the extra laboratory and equipment costs out of its own budget.

Improving conditions for the patients at the unit was her first priority. The clinic has been moved to a new location within the hospital where its bright waiting room and office provide a more pleasant environment for the critically sick. "The clinic they were working in before was such an awful place, the patients used to sit in a long miserable corridor, freezing cold," said one frequent visitor.

However, despite her optimistic determination, colleagues say that she is frustrated that her numerous requests to the Minister for Health for more beds, doctors, nurses and personnel to document clinical research on Aids in Ireland have been repeatedly ignored or rejected.

Most of the country's Aids cases occur in Dublin, in the catchment area of St James. Many of the people Fiona Mulcahy has to deal with are drug abusers and people living in poverty in the inner-city. Of the 1,005 HIV-infected people in Ireland, 567 are intravenous drug users, 141 are gay or bisexual men, 112 are haemophiliacs, 83 are heterosexual people, 75 are babies and there are 27 others.

"She doesn't shun anybody. They're not lepers or outcasts to her," says the mother of one Aids victim who died 11 months ago. "She treats them like human beings."

Sometimes, she said, Fiona Mulcahy has had to remain calm and comforting in the face of a confused mixture of anger and bewilderment. "Patients would scream and shout at her. They'd take their frustrations out on her. They expect a miracle and think she can just flick a finger and it'll happen."

IT is a world far removed



# Positive thinker

By Anne-Marie Smyth

from the comfortable middle-class background in Santry and later Malahide in Dublin, where Fiona Mulcahy grew up, the eldest of two children. Her father Donal, who died recently, was a civil servant with the Customs and Excise office. Her brother Donal is now an accountant.

At Trinity College, where she studied medicine, she was a steady worker and always in the top section of the class.

**S**HE is described as having been good fun, taking an active part in the medical students' pantomimes, and enjoying regular nights out at the theatre and at concerts.

She qualified as a doctor in 1979, began her internship in general medicine at the now closed Sir Patrick Dun's hospital in Dublin and shortly after that she started dating her future husband, Charles Williams, who had graduated in medicine a year ahead of her. At that time Aids "didn't exist" — it wasn't until 1981 that the medical world knew there was an epidemic, and a further two years before the virus was identified.

July 1, 1982, the day she was admitted to the Royal College of Physicians was

also the day she got married. Shortly afterwards she went to live in Leeds, where her husband was working as a radiologist. She was taken on as a registrar at the Leeds General Infirmary.

It was there that her career took wings. She was, according to senior doctor, "destined for greatness". The doctor she trained under in general medicine, Dr Chandler, described her as the brightest registrar he'd ever known.

However in 1985 her medical career changed direction. A test had been discovered for Aids and that year scientists were able to map out its genetic structure for the first time. Fiona Mulcahy recognised the challenges and the opportunities presented and applied to work in the Genito-urinary unit at Leeds.

"I wanted a career in hospital medicine. This speciality seemed to offer a much broader field and involved close contact with patients," she said shortly after her appointment to St James'.

Her good relationship with her patients and her ability to handle them with understanding was noted, especially in her dealings with children who had been sexually abused. "She had enormous intuition and was extremely good not just with

the children but in dealing with the parents as well," says Dr Michael Waugh, head of the Genito-urinary unit at Leeds.

"She was also inordinately kind to the young gay men that she treated and had a great following, almost a fan club, amongst them. She was greatly missed when she left," he added.

Indeed she was so successful as a locum doctor that a full time post was created for her at the unit and in 1986 she became the first woman consultant in her field in Leeds. Aids being a new area of research, it was a field where young doctors could rise very quickly.

Nine months later, the newly-created post of Irish consultant specialising in Aids was offered to her. "We knew we'd lost her when that job was advertised," said Dr Waugh. At just 30, she became the country's youngest ever genito-urinary consultant.

She now lives in Blackrock with her two year-old daughter Jennifer. However because there is a shortage of consultant radiologist positions in Ireland her husband is still working in England, at a hospital in Liverpool. He flies back to

idays are spent travelling around Ireland, more often than not ending up in Dingle. She keeps her work and her private life very separate, rarely speaking of her work when she's outside the hospital.

Since her return to Ireland she has earned enormous respect outside the country, as an international Aids specialist. "Her work is known and respected much further afield than Ireland," said Wallace Dinsmore, the editor of the *International Journal of STD and Aids*. She represents Ireland on the EC Aids Specialist Committee, at international Aids congresses and as the Irish participant in the British research trials on AZT.

**H**OWEVER it is amongst her patients at St James that she has earned most respect and devotion. She is called Fiona by both them and their families. She remembers little details of their lives. She returns their phone calls personally. No problem or worry, emotional, physical or sexual, is too small for her to take the time to explain or to reassure a patient.

"How do you speak of an angel," asked a patient's mother. "I never met such kindness. She was always available if you needed her. One Sunday my son took very sick and she left her home and her family to come up to St James to treat him," she said.

Other patients have found her similarly considerate. "She told me I had Aids on a Thursday at four o'clock. When I went into the hospital at eight o'clock, she was there to make sure I was OK. First thing the following morning she called in again to see me before I started my tests and she came to visit me in hospital over the weekend," said an Aids patient.

"The key to her personality is being very upfront," he said. "When I was first diagnosed as being full-blown Aids she told me all the things I'd need to consider, like making a will. She told me that where there were options in the treatment, it would be me that would make the decision. She's a very good reader of people's ability to deal with things," he said.

Her popularity and expertise, however, have had one major drawback, according to James Walsh, Aids co-ordinator. "St James was not designed to be the Aids centre for the whole country, but her reputation draws cases to her from outside her own catchment area, giving her a heavier workload. She would never turn a patient away and that suits the lads out there who don't want to have anything to do with Aids," he said.

He feels, like most people working in the speciality, that the time has come when the government must appoint another Genito-urinary consultant with expertise in Aids.

They point out the disparity in the fact that there are three Aids consultants in Belfast, dealing with the 80 HIV-infected patients in the North, compared to one Aids consultant in the Republic, which has over a thousand HIV infected patients. "It's too much responsibility for one person," said David Murray, of Body Positive, part of Aids Action Alliance.

However, with the defeat in the Dail last week of a private members bill recommending an increase in medical personnel under the special Task Force on Aids, Fiona Mulcahy seems destined to face the spiralling numbers of Aids cases on