



# CNI

## **PRESS WATCH - Religion and health care: What role does the Catholic Church play in Irish hospitals?**

**The planned move of the National Maternity Hospital to St Vincent's, a site owned by the Sisters of Charity, has opened up a new discussion about religion and health care in Ireland, Cliodhna Russell writes in The Journal.ie**

The situation of religious orders providing health care services is not unique to Ireland – the Catholic Church is the largest non-government provider of health care services in the world.

A number of Irish hospitals are owned by religious orders but there are also a confusing number of different structures at play with state-run, private and voluntary hospitals. At least two voluntary hospitals formerly run by religious orders – Our Lady of Lourdes in Drogheda and

Portiuncula in Ballinasloe – have become State-run hospitals in recent years.

Two orders of nuns own some of the biggest hospitals in Dublin. The St Vincent's Healthcare Group, made up of St Vincent's University Hospital, St Vincent's Private and St Michael's Hospital in Dun Laoghaire is owned by the Sisters of Charity, while the Sisters of Mercy own the Mater Hospital, the Children's University Hospital at Temple Street and Cappagh Orthopedic Hospital in Finglas.

The proposed deal for the new National Maternity Hospital would see the Sisters of Charity owning the facility in Dublin 4 as it would be providing the land at no cost.

There has been strong criticism of the financial deal, with objectors pointing out that the Sisters of Charity still owe €3 million to the redress scheme for survivors of Magdalene Laundries, which it ran along with three other congregations.

Almost 100,000 people have signed a petition which demands an apology from the Sisters of Charity and that it pays its share of the redress scheme.

And with talk of an abortion referendum potentially being held next year, others are concerned that the new maternity hospital would not allow abortion, even if legal, on religious grounds.

Health Minister Simon Harris has repeatedly insisted that the hospital will be independently run despite being under the ownership of the Sisters of Charity.

However, in the Sunday Times last weekend the Bishop of Elphin Kevin Doran implied that the Sisters of Charity will have to obey the rules of the Catholic Church if they become the owners of the new National Maternity Hospital.

Catholic hospitals have “a special responsibility... to Catholic teachings about the value of human life and the dignity and the ultimate destiny of the human person,” he said.

“Public funding, while it brings with it other legal and moral obligations, does not change that responsibility.”

## **Archbishop chair of Holles St**

Of the 20 Irish hospitals which currently have public maternity units, none are owned by a

religious order but the National Maternity Hospital in Holles St is owned by a private trust whose chair is the Archbishop of Dublin.

However, Diarmuid Martin has not attended board meetings at the hospital for over a decade and has described the charter at Holles Street as an 'an anachronistic structure' that needs to be changed.

He has asked two separate health ministers to change the structure so the post of the Archbishop of Dublin is not automatically appointed as chair.

## **Maternity**

Part of the public concerns with the plans for the National Maternity Hospital are how the religious ethos could affect the patients of the hospital.

The Irish Times reported this week on a document in which the Sisters of Charity set out the guidelines and ethos for what should happen in their hospitals.

The document says that the morning-after pill, IVF, vasectomies, sterilisation of women and abortion are all forbidden.

“In our healthcare facilities any such procedures in which we do not respect the life and physical integrity of each human being from conception onwards violate the mission of safeguarding life and health,” the document says.

While the Mater Hospital in Dublin is not a maternity hospital, it found itself at the centre of a controversial ethics related situation due to its Catholic ownership.

In 2005, lung cancer patients at the Mater Hospital were stopped from taking part in cancer trials because female patients who get could get pregnant were told to take contraceptives under the treatment – something that went against the hospital’s Catholic ethos.

The objection was because the wording in the accompanying patient information leaflet mentioned various forms of artificial contraception.

The Mater issued a statement saying the “absolute requirement” that women of childbearing age must use contraceptives during the trial was “not supported by our ethos”.

In the past the leaflets had advised the woman to avoid becoming pregnant, but didn't outline how she might do so.

The clinical trial did proceed after the hospital's ethics committee came under fire. Mater oncologists Dr John McCaffrey and Prof Desmond Carney wrote an open letter to the Irish Independent at the time saying the Catholic Church had no right to interfere in the doctor-patient relationship.

***With more than 40 years combined experience in managing cancer, in Ireland and abroad, we strongly believe that no-one should become pregnant while on chemotherapy. We have always counselled our patients to avoid pregnancy.***

In the end the supplemental information was not given to patients embarking on the trial.

TheJournal.ie asked all the hospitals owned by the Sisters of Mercy and the Sisters of Charity if there have been any other instances where those on the board have objected to hospital matters under religious grounds.

The only hospital to respond was the Mater Hospital which is actively checking through all appropriate records.

Dr Katy Radford, from the Institute for Conflict Research based in Belfast, who carried out a report called Health, Faith and Equality in Ireland said the church has learnt from its involvement in previous scandals.

***Dreadful scandals that erupted has made the church more understanding of how it needs to be responsive to diversity and equality issues – we have to trust in a process that government and church act in good faith for the care of those most vulnerable in society.***

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