

## In memoriam: H. E. Counihan

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Dr. H.E. Counihan who died on 27th July 2009 was one who served a generation from the end of World War II to the 1980s.

He was born in 1918, and was the second son of Dr. J. H. Counihan a renowned GP in Ennis, Co. Clare, and his uncle Dick was also a family Doctor in Kilrush. His mother Molly was a member of the well-known O' Mara clan and her father was the RMS of the local Psychiatric Hospital.

As a school boy he initially attended St. Flannans College and later went to Clongowes Wood College. He entered the medical school of UCD and graduated with first class honours in 1942, and obtained his MD degree in 1946. His post graduate training years were mainly spent in London during the blitz of World War II, where he trained in respiratory medicine, and that is where he met his future wife Eileen Gonty.

I first met Harry Counihan in 1943 in our digs at no. 3 Pembroke road, where there was a varied collection of all classes of students from TCD and UCD.

In 1946, he was appointed Consultant Physician to the Richmond Hospital, as Assistant to Dr. G. T. O' Brien. My next meeting with him was in 1947, as his first House physician (now called interns). Tuberculosis was a scourge in these times, and both of them pioneered respiratory diseases in Ireland at that time.

Consultants under the Voluntary Hospital system did not receive state payment until the late 1950s when junior consultants were paid £300.00 and the seniors were paid £600.00 per annum. The new hospital contract in the 1970s

raised the remuneration of the consultants. He was also a consultant to the National Maternity Hospital.

Harry Counihan was involved in many extra curricular activities and was a prominent member of the IMA, where he always had a penchant for asking very searching questions before a meeting ended.

In 1974, he declined a request to become triple President of the BMA, Canadian MA and the IMA. He was Editor of the IMA Journal, where he served for 10 years after Mr. Bill Doolin had retired and many of his editorials were on matters of public concern and are widely quoted. He also wrote on medical topics in newspapers on the costs of hospital services to promote better and more rational services. He did a special study of health services in other countries, and had a deep knowledge of them and new ideas in the health service.

Harry was involved in many extra curricular activities during his career, and achieved many important distinctions, five of which were appointments by the Minister of Health.

However, one of his special interests was his commitment to the disabled and mentally handicapped. He was greatly honoured in 1999, when he was awarded "Doctor of the Year" and featured on RTE. He was a founder member of the Rehabilitation Institute, Chairman of a group, which helped the Mentally Handicapped at Glenmarroon.

In his later years before he retired from The Richmond Hospital he became Medical Director of PARC, Ibin Bitar Hospital in Baghdad, where he served as Administrator and Director for 3 years. He was responsible for inviting medical and surgical experts from Ireland to treat, operate and give lectures.

Ursula Sheridan who was Director of Nursing during his time in Baghdad once told me that Harry resembled

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Somerset Maugham as he was driven to work daily with his “boater hat” in situ. Sadly, during the Iraqi and Kuwaiti wars the hospital was severely damaged.

A superb tribute was paid to him many years ago, when he was named as “the conscience of the medical profession in Ireland”. Without prejudice I can honestly say that Harry Counihan was one the most respected, trustworthy, and ethical physician of his generation.

As a man Harry was the personification of integrity, humanity, compassion, professional ethics, and above all a family man, which was so eloquently testified by his grandson Matthew McGann on behalf of the family on the day of the funeral. Harry was most committed to his patients at the Richmond Hospital, and had a very deep empathy with them and was greatly admired by his nursing colleagues.

As an expert bridge player he could be grumpy at times, especially if his colleagues did not aspire to his standards, and postmortems could be somewhat intimidating.

As a golfer, he achieved single figures and was almost “semi-professional”, and a winner of many trophies, including hospital cups and he knew every blade of grass in his beloved Lahinch, and wrote a chapter in their centenary book. At the age of 82, he had a gross score of 81 at Milltown Golf Club, 1 shot below his age, which was duly and jovially celebrated.

When teaching students he was pragmatic and imparted his common sense to generations of students, and I record a few of his bon mots:

Student—the patient is jaundiced sir  
 Are you asking me or telling me?—retorted Harry  
 Student—he is jaundiced  
 One of us must be colour blind and it isn't me—  
 replied Harry  
 Examining chests is a game but you have to know  
 how to play it.

It's great to be great but it's greater to be human.

In his latter years, he had to endure great sadness and suffering with the death of his eldest son Michael, his beloved wife Eileen after 61 years of marriage, his daughter Catherine, and more recently his other daughter Jane.

Harry Counihan will be sadly missed by all those who had the pleasure of knowing him. He was a unique man, physician and administrator. He was a man ahead of his time who with his colleagues of that generation pioneered the practise of modern medicine for the great benefit of his successors today. He played a large part in decision making and had great influence in the day to day running of the Richmond, unfortunately greatly lacking today under the present health care structure.

He leaves a legacy, which is not likely to be replicated for a long time to come.

In conclusion, Lord Moynihan of Leeds said “In surgery, craftsmanship is much knowledge is much and wisdom which is timely and rightful application is more, but as we establish our rightful place in the world it is chiefly character that counts”.

Harry Counihan had character in abundance.

To his remaining children, Mary, Joan, Claire, Eileen and Henry, his brothers Roger, Frank, and his sisters Mary, Honor, and Ruth, we offer our deepest sympathy on this very sad occasion.

As a foot note I would like to quote the following verse.

“I watch the sunset fading away,  
 Lighting the clouds with sleep  
 And as the evening closes its eyes  
 I feel your presence near me”