

## **Doctors and The Mother and Baby Homes Final Report**

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Dear Sir,

Faulkner famously remarked that the past is never dead – it's not even past.

As we reflect on the suffering of generations of women and children in State-run institutions<sup>1</sup>, Irish citizens have been prompted to ask ourselves: 'What would I have done? Would I have spoken out against what now seems so wrong, and yet at the time went largely unchallenged?'

For many years, those who sought to separate Church from State in Ireland, particularly in healthcare, were regarded as inconvenient, subversive or worse. So, very few did. Within medicine, Dr. Noël Browne was a rare exception, earning few friends in the process. In politics, two of our subsequent presidents, Michael D. Higgins and Mary Robinson, were among a number of legislators starting conversations most were not ready to have – for example by their failed Illegitimate Children Bill in 1974<sup>2</sup>, seeking to strike the insulting label of 'illegitimacy' from Irish law.

In particular, members of the medical profession – especially those charged with the care of children – have cause for reflection. Systems of oppression cannot endure without at least tacit assent from those with power and influence. The Mother and Child scheme in 1951 could have brought about some improvement in conditions for the women and children in Mother and Baby Homes. The repudiation of that scheme was due in part to opposition from doctors.

While it is impossible to know how one would act in another time or place, we are wholly responsible for decisions made now. If we are truly sorry for the injustices of the past, we must acknowledge those which reflect them today.

Today, the Traveller and Roma communities in Ireland are marginalised in a manner not greatly different to fifty or a hundred years ago. The alarming life expectancy and infant mortality statistics seen in these groups continue to resemble the standards of the 1940s. Yet any politician who speaks up to address such matters will gain few votes for doing so.

Today, children growing up in Direct Provision centres around Ireland are deprived of the security and autonomy they need to overcome their trauma and to develop as individuals. Instead, we consign them to the repeated trauma of this undignified and stigmatising system. While the Royal College of Physicians in Ireland has called for its abolition<sup>3</sup>, Direct Provision received scarce attention in 2020 other than for its capacity to accelerate the spread of Covid-19. Notably, the recent publication of a governmental White Paper, committing to replace this system with a rights-based alternative, premised on integration<sup>4</sup>, is to be welcomed. As advocates for the rights of children, doctors have a role to play in ensuring these words are followed by actions.

Apologising for the past is straightforward. What is more difficult and more valuable is to learn from it, by facing up to shortcomings which continue to echo it today.

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