

An Post Celebrating Women Medics



From L–R: Dr Rhona Mahony, Harriet Wheelock, Dr Ronan Kelly, and Prof Janice Walshe at the An Post International Women's Day event to celebrate the launch of the Women Medics stamps on 5th March 2026.

On Thursday, March 5, 2026, An Post held a special event to mark International Women's Day with a new set of stamps celebrating women medics. The female doctors being honoured with their photograph on a stamp were Rhona Mahony, Janice Walshe, Emily Winifred Dickson (1866-1944), and Kathleen Lynn (1874-1955). The occasion was chaired by Dearbhail McDonald, journalist, broadcaster, and writer.

Debbie Byrne, An Post, welcomed the large attendance of family, friends, and medical and nursing colleagues. In her address, she stated that An Post takes a holistic approach to wellbeing, supporting their staff across the three key pillars: health, work environment, and career development. Practical supports that reflect the diverse health experiences that women encounter are provided. There is a female talent acceleration programme. There are flexible working options in order that women can balance work and life responsibilities.

Dearbail began by pointing out that other countries, including UK and France, have an honours system to mark the unique contributions made by outstanding individuals to their society. In Ireland, the stamp acts as a quasi-honours system. It is a long and detailed process. The nominees are submitted to the Cabinet two years in advance for approval. The four recipients of today's honour have been trailblazing women. Their achievements span the last 150 years. All have displayed the unique qualities of a great doctor, clinical skills, commitment, advocacy, and a vision for future and better medical care.

Ronan Kelly, historian and author of “‘Every Branch of the Healing Art’: A History of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland”, provided the background about Emily Winifred Dickson. She was born in Dungannon and was the first female fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI). In 1885, the RCSI had extended its educational facilities to women. Emily entered RCSI in 1887, being the only female student in the class. She was a brilliant student. She subsequently worked in the Richmond and the Coombe hospitals where a ward was named after her. She became an examiner in midwifery at RCSI but many students objected to being examined by a woman and petitioned against her appointment. Emily, however, retained her post. Her husband returned shell-shocked from the World War I and she became the major wage earner. She had moved to England in 1915 where she continued to work as a doctor for the rest of her life. She was a pioneering doctor who helped to remove the prejudice against women working in medicine.

Harriet Wheelock, Keeper of Collections at the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland Heritage Centre, provided the background about Kathleen Lynn, about whom she has co-authored a book. Kathleen was born in County Mayo, in the shadow of the famine. She was from a middle-class Anglo-Irish family. She worked in Patrick Dun's, the Rotunda, and the Royal Victoria Eye & Ear hospitals. She participated in many activities in Ireland up to her death at age 81. She was involved in the 1916 Rising, the War of Independence, and the formative years of the Irish Free State. She became chief medical officer of the Irish Citizen Army. She co-founded the St Ultan's Hospital for Sick Infants in 1919. The mission of the hospital was to provide much needed facilities for impoverished infants and their mothers. She emphasized the virtues of cleanliness and fresh air. Her interest in child development is exemplified by the visit of Maria Montessori, innovator of early child education, in 1934. In 1937, the hospital introduced Bacillus Calmette-Guérin (BCG) vaccination.

Rhona Mahony is a consultant obstetrician at The National Maternity Hospital, serving as the first female Master from 2012 to 2018. She said that when she was informed that her name and photograph would be on a forthcoming stamp, it was a complete surprise. She described it as a great honour. Emily Dickson and Kathleen Lynn were pioneers. They showed women how to be effective administrators. They emphasized the relationship between poverty and illness, particularly women and children's health. Today, there are very gratifying reductions in maternal and infant mortality. Rhona stated that when she became Master, she faced many

challenges in women's health, among them was insufficient investment. She learned from women about women's needs. There were the past legacies: the Catholic church and its influence on female reproduction; and the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1935 criminalising the use of contraceptives—it remained in place for 50 years. It culminated in the prosecution of the Virgin Megastore in 1991 for selling condoms. There was the protracted debate around the termination of pregnancy even when the pregnant mother was very seriously ill. Ireland's admission to the EU helped to change the legal landscape. The great advance in her field has been prevention of sepsis, antibiotics, modern anaesthesia, fetal medicine, neonatology, and genetics.

Women have different expectations now. They are more vocal. There is a greater focus on choice. However, the overarching desire of women is to have a safe birth and a healthy baby.

There are many challenges. There are the needs of women in direct provision who do not have a voice. We must respect cultural differences and build it into student teaching. Also our medical and nursing staff are very international.

Obstetrics is a high risk area of medicine. Complications happen quickly. It requires skill, clarity, and good communication to enable appropriate quick action. There must be accountability and responsibility.

Rhona said that what inspired her most were her colleagues. She found working with bright minds intoxicating. People's continual commitment to the delivery of best care to their patients is very gratifying.

Janice Walshe is a consultant medical oncologist at St Vincent's Hospital and a lead researcher in international breast cancer trials. She said that it is incredible to be honoured by An Post in this way. She wanted to be a doctor since age 12. Her father was a GP and she has many memories of patients waiting to see him in their house throughout the day and into the evenings. She said that she is overwhelmed at how things have advanced for women during her career. When she entered medicine in the 1990s, 60% of students were female. Over time, there has been the appointment of greater numbers of female consultants. The success has spilled over to other disciplines including nurses, many of whom are now in senior administrative roles. Getting into medical training remains a difficult task for many students. It is a highly competitive points system. Those students whose parents can afford extra-mural grinds have an advantage.

She said that her work as a clinical oncologist poses many challenges. Good communication with patients is critical when trying to explain the complex options in treatment management. Patients must be provided with the correct information. This is particularly important when discussing care with overseas women who may have a lack of trust in medicines and vaccines.

In her summing up of the event, Dearbhail McDonald said that the stamp's recognition of female medics is an act of recovery. The stamps help to change attitude and highlight the immense contribution that female doctors have made and are continuing to make in Irish medicine.

J.F.A. Murphy
Editor