



## Dr Eveleen O'Brien (1901–1981)

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### Abstract

Dr Eveleen O'Brien (1901–1981) was a leading figure in Irish asylum medicine, with a particular interest in the care of patients suffering from epilepsy and the crossover between neurology and psychiatry. From 1933 to 1966, O'Brien worked in Grangegorman Mental Hospital. She was appointed Governor of the Central Mental Hospital, Dundrum in January 1968 and remained in this position until 1971. An enthusiastic researcher, O'Brien published several papers in the *Journal of Mental Science*, including Ireland's first systematic review of insulin therapy (1939). In 1942, O'Brien obtained a doctorate in medicine (MD or *Medicinae Doctor*) from the National University of Ireland for a thesis titled "Epilepsy and its theories, results of treatment". O'Brien died in Sutton, North Dublin, on 31 July 1981 at 80 years of age. O'Brien belonged to a remarkable group of Irish women doctors in the early 1900s, each of whom made substantial contributions to the development of Irish medical services and improvement of social conditions, especially for the socially excluded and the mentally ill.

**Keywords** Diagnosis · History · Ireland · Mental disorder · Psychiatrist · Psychiatry

### Background

Dr Eveleen O'Brien (1901–1981) was a leading figure in Irish asylum medicine, with a particular interest in the care of patients suffering from epilepsy and the crossover between neurology and psychiatry. This paper outlines O'Brien's contribution to twentieth-century Irish psychiatry and places her life in the context of other earlier, comparable figures such as Dr Eleanora Fleury and Dr Ada English.

### Personal life

Eveleen Josephine O'Brien was born in Tubbercurry County, Sligo, in 1901, the fourth of six children in a middle-class Catholic family. Her mother, Mary Josephine Ahearn, married Thomas O'Brien, a member of the Royal Irish Constabulary. Due to the nature of his work, the family relocated several times during O'Brien's childhood [1].

O'Brien began her education in the Ursuline Convent in Thurles and studied Latin and Mathematics, both of which were essential in order to matriculate and qualify for entry to university, but were rarely taught to girls in the early twentieth century. The O'Brien family was living in Dublin by the time O'Brien and her older brother William entered University College Dublin (UCD), both graduating with degrees in medicine, she in 1924 at the age of 23.

Between 1924 and 1926, O'Brien worked in Scotland as an assistant in large general practices. She also continued pursue education, receiving a diploma in public health from UCD in 1925. In 1928, after a short period working in the Children's Hospital, Temple Street, she returned to the UK to continue her specialist training there. O'Brien completed three months of neurology training in the Neurological Hospital, Queens Square, London, and, following this, completed training in psychiatry in the Maudsley Hospital, London, receiving a Diploma in Psychological Medicine from the Royal College of Physicians in 1929.

### Psychiatry career in Ireland

O'Brien began her career in the Irish asylums in the early 1930s, when the asylum system was still expanding steadily. The Richmond Lunatic Asylum at Grangegorman in Dublin,

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founded in 1810 following the Criminal Lunatics Act of 1800, had been one of the first to provide systematic care for the mentally ill and intellectually disabled poor in Ireland [2]. There were, however, continual problems with a lack of funding, inadequate accommodation and severe overcrowding in Grangegorman and the various other asylums that appeared during the 1800s. A branch asylum was opened in Portrane, north Dublin, to help address this problem and was later called St Ita's Hospital.

In 1930, O'Brien's first position in the Irish asylum system was as assistant medical officer in Portrane Mental Hospital, and it was here that her lifelong work on epilepsy began. At the meeting of the Irish Division of the Royal Medico-Psychological Association (RMPA), O'Brien was notably outspoken about the needs of asylum patients, particularly those with epilepsy [3]. Also in 1933, O'Brien moved from Portrane to Grangegorman, where she continued her clinical and academic work, being nominated as final examiner for the Nursing Certificate of the RMPA in 1935 [4] and receiving a diploma in public administration from the National University of Ireland in 1949.

During O'Brien's employment in Portrane and Grangegorman between 1930 and 1966, conditions for both staff and patients were generally grim and depressing in both asylums. Real, systematic change only began in 1966, when the Commission of Inquiry on Mental Illness led to a move towards community care for those suffering from mental illness or intellectual disability. This came, however, just too late for O'Brien.

## Scientific work

An enthusiastic researcher, Dr O'Brien published several papers in the *Journal of Mental Science* starting in 1931 with a paper about the treatment of epilepsy in Portrane [5]. A further paper on "the Sedimentation Rate of Red Blood-Cells: Its Diagnostic and Prognostic Value in the Treatment of the Physical Ailments of the Insane" was published in the *Journal of Mental Science* in July 1934 [5]. In this study, O'Brien outlined the process of analysing the sedimentation rate of blood in 383 asylum patients. She reported that the sedimentation rate was abnormal in a form of dysentery described as being peculiar to mental hospitals and presumed to be a result of toxæmia and ulceration of the bowel.

Of the 383 cases tested, 347 gave normal readings, 22 gave readings between 7.5 and 5.5 cubic centimetres (cc), and 14 cases below 5.5 cc. O'Brien also noted that a surprisingly large number of inpatients were apparently in normal health but found to be tubercular and concluded that it was particularly difficult to diagnose physical ailments in the insane, due to lack of patient cooperation with medical intervention. A high percentage of normal readings were noted among the 73 patients with epilepsy tested by O'Brien.

Five years later, in May 1939, a key publication on insulin therapy, arising out of O'Brien's work using the treatment in Grangegorman, appeared in the *Journal of Mental Science* [6]. Insulin therapy was developed in the 1930s by Austrian psychiatrist and neurophysiologist Manfred Sakel (1900–1957) and involved administering insulin to individuals with mental disorder in order to increase weight and inhibit excitement. In Ireland, it was first introduced at Grangegorman in 1938 by Dr John Dunne and O'Brien [2].

Their 1939 paper in the *Journal of Mental Science* included discussion of nine patients treated with insulin therapy over a six-month period, with three full recoveries and six cases of complications described. All patients were female and ranged in age from 16 to 27 years. All had longstanding symptoms for periods between six months and several years, including "katatonic excitement", bizarre and persecutory delusional beliefs and auditory hallucinations.

Insulin treatment involved gradually increasing the insulin dose so as to induce coma. This was accompanied in some cases by intranasal glucose and in others by concomitant use of injections of Cardiazol (pentylentetrazol, a stimulant used to induce seizures). Full recovery from symptoms was noted following 16 to 39 sessions of insulin and induction of five to 34 comas. Complications included acute pulmonary oedema, febrile illness and meningitis. The conclusion of their study was that, despite the expense, challenges and risks involved, insulin coma therapy was still a valuable treatment, once used with due care. This paper was pioneering in that it was Ireland's first systematic review on insulin therapy, a commonly used but controversial treatment.

Following on from her epilepsy research, O'Brien obtained an MD from the National University of Ireland in 1942 for her thesis titled "Epilepsy and its theories, results of treatment" [7]. In her thesis, O'Brien outlined some intriguing insights into the history of epilepsy, from the earliest writings, when the condition was believed to be "due to the soul's departure from the body", to its descent in Roman times "from a sacred to a demoniacal origin", when "it was customary to spit when a known epileptic passed in the street". In the nineteenth century, with the introduction of Hughlings Jackson's theory of the neurological basis of the disease, "the epileptic", according to O'Brien, "metaphorically speaking, was wrapped in cotton wool and forbidden either to work or play in case either would excite the cerebral cortex".

O'Brien outlined many other theories about epilepsy including the theory of cortical instability, the theory of intravascular coagulation, the vaso-motor theory, the toxic theory, the metabolic theory, the allergic theory and the psychogenic theory. The toxic theory was one most explored by O'Brien herself, through her study of the sedimentation rate of red blood cells. The psychogenic theory suggested that people with epilepsy were "quarrelsome, egoistic, hypochondriacal and morbidly religious... mental childishness is the most striking characteristic of

epileptics”. It is possibly that epilepsy was conflated with intellectual disability in some of these theories.

Following on from her discussion of the history and theories of epilepsy, O’Brien described a number of original studies she conducted in Grangegorman using both drug therapies of the time (e.g. bromides, Gardenal, Rutional, Prominal Gelineau’s Dragees, Peptone and Epanutin) and the “hygienic regime (focused chiefly on diet and treatment of infection)”. O’Brien noted that her “experience in the treatment of epileptics has been a happy and encouraging one...work on their behalf is well advised”. However, some of her commentary also revealed the general societal attitude towards people with epilepsy in twentieth-century Ireland and elsewhere, as O’Brien noted that “their unnatural crimes, revolting hypocrisy and brutal ferocity are facts, grim and real, but so also is their affliction a very real and terrible one”.

## Later life

In January 1968, following her retirement from Grangegorman, O’Brien was appointed Governor of the Central Mental Hospital, Dundrum, a position she held until 1981. Dr Michael Reynolds, outgoing Resident Physician and Governor, met her at the hospital in 1968 and recalls that “Dr. O’Brien, to a 34 years old, appeared as a quite old-looking, small-statured, spare, rather frail lady, perhaps even beyond retirement age” [8].

The incoming Clinical Director, Dr Liam Daly, met her in 1971 and recalls that O’Brien “received me very warmly. She and her two fellow-retirees from the general psychiatric service, Doctors Sullivan and Cassin, were all frank with me on the overall need for a modern forensic service. She appeared to be a healthy, vital sexagenarian and carefully advised me on specific consultant staffing guarantees which I should obtain before considering the director position [...] I formed the impression at the time that she and her two colleagues were caring for the patients with surprising efficiency on limited resources [...] I know that Evelyn’s sound advice encouraged me to work in that service” [9].

As was common among women doctors in Ireland in the early twentieth-century Ireland, O’Brien never married. Emily Winifred Dickson, a comparable figure who worked in the asylums at the time is quoted as saying “a woman should not give up the medical profession for the profession of marriage unless she liked the latter profession better” [1]. O’Brien spent a large portion of her adult life living with Helena Molony, a political and labour activist, actively involved in the workers’ campaign during the 1913 Lockout. They met in Grangegorman where O’Brien was Molony’s treating doctor and they subsequently lived together in a property on North Circular Road until Molony’s death in 1967 [10]. O’Brien died some 14 years later in Sutton, north Dublin, on 31 July 1981 at the age of 80 years.

## Conclusion

O’Brien’s career is notable for several reasons. In the first instance, O’Brien drew particular attention to the problems presented by epilepsy and the plight of patients with epilepsy in the vast Irish asylums of the day. In addition to her own research into treatments, she campaigned for improved research facilities and laboratories to help others continue to investigate epilepsy and develop better ways of treating it [3].

Throughout her career, O’Brien contributed to both science and clinical care in the often harsh and sometimes uncaring environment of the Irish asylum system. Despite the challenges, she was known as “Lady O’Brien” among the patients in Grangegorman, who regarded her as someone who was on their side [1]. Her instinctual support for the marginalised in society lasted until her death: in her will, she left a significant portion of her estate to be held in trust by the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin “for such charities devoted exclusively to the needs of necessitous, secular unmarried women of Ireland from and over the age of 65 years”.

O’Brien belongs to a remarkable group of Irish women doctors, each of whom made substantial contributions to the development of Irish medical services and improvement of social conditions, especially for the socially excluded and the mentally ill in the early twentieth century. Throughout her career, she eventually attained senior posts in the asylums, despite the difficulties commonly encountered by female doctors of this era, such as Dr Ada English (1875–1944) and Dr Eleanora Fleury (1867–1960).

English was one of the first generation of female medical graduates in Ireland and Great Britain (graduating in 1903) and she oversaw significant therapeutic innovations in Ballinasloe District Asylum in County Galway at a time when such innovation was rare. In addition to her medical work, English was also highly active in Irish political life, participating in the Irish Civil War as a senior member of Cumann na mBan [11]. Fleury, in similar vein, was a dedicated asylum doctor and lifelong republican who became the first woman member of the RMPA in 1894 and thus the first female psychiatrist in Ireland or Great Britain [12].

By 1900, woman membership had grown to 14, with the first female president, Dr A.H.A. Boyle, elected in 1939.

This group of politically active and socially minded doctors, typified by English and Fleury, had a lasting legacy in both Irish medicine and broader society—and Eveleen O’Brien belongs firmly with this group in the medical and social histories of twentieth-century Ireland.

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### Compliance with ethical standards

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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