

Women on Walls Opening

**Dr Avril Hutch – Associate Director & Head of Equality, Diversity and
Inclusion**

5 March 2019

Distinguished guests; representatives of our partner institutions Accenture and Business to Arts; RCSI staff and students; and most especially our portrait artists and the family members and friends of our portrait subjects, a very warm welcome to RCSI to celebrate this special occasion - the grand unveiling of our Women on Walls portrait collection.

My name is Avril Hutch and I am the Head of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion here at RCSI and it is an honour and privilege to open proceeding here today for this historic event.

And history is certainly all around us. This College and the rooms you visit here today have a long and storied past. The Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland was founded by Royal Charter in 1784, to set and support professional standards for surgical training and practice in Ireland.

The College first met in the boardroom in the Rotunda Hospital and later acquired a hall at Mercer's Hospital; a fine stone house set up by Mary Mercer in 1724 as a the shelter of poor girls.

In 1810, the College moved here to St Stephen's Green. Our founding fathers George Renny, Samuel Croker-King and William Dease were determined to make the College a dynamic training ground and with the demand for Army and Navy surgeons created by the Napoleonic wars, the College prospered.

In 1885 Queen Victoria issued the second supplemental charter and it was agreed in this very room to open the Medical School to women.

And so came Mary Emily Dowson the first *qualified* female surgeon in Britain or Ireland. Then followed Mary Josephine Hannan and Emily Winifred Dickson who became the first female Fellow in 1893. And there have been many more that have followed them.

And of course, other strong women spent time within these hallowed walls. For six days in April 1916, Countess Markievicz, Michael Mallin and an army of insurgents made this very room their garrison – with brass door handles still bear bullet holes and graffiti adorns the balcony overhead.

Our story is filled with strong women and men, and yet our portraiture is not reflective of our past. Our pioneering men are solidly present, but our pioneering women have yet to fully find their place. There is more of their story to tell.

We know that female representation in historical portraiture is more often of wives, mothers, daughters and sisters and typically defined by their relationships to others. Their achievements are frequently uncited, unacknowledged. Their opportunities curtailed by the weight of societies expectations. Their stance sometimes subdued, meek or romanticized. Reflective of the time.

Not so, our Women on Walls, who represent where we are today. These women are proud, strong and stand on the pillars of their own, often hard won, worth and achievement. We have come to learn of the meticulous habits

of these ladies, their determination to aid the less privileged in society, the bravery as they set out for India, Angola, Uganda, South Africa and England. To understand these women, we have studied their nuances - how they swept their hair in a tight bun, or wore a certain brooch but never a certain type of earring, or rode a rickety bike, liked their prose a certain way or a chair lined up just so. We've immersed ourselves in their books and articles, listened to patient's accounts about transformative fistula programmes in Africa, the impact of TB vaccinations campaigns in Dublin, how women's health and the lives for those with disabilities were championed, and how some flew their suffragette colours at full mast when it must have been ferociously difficult to do so.

From the initial steady stroke of a scalpel, to the purposeful mark of a paintbrush, to the final flourish of feather duster across gilded frames – much has gone into translating these stories into what you will see today.

Over the past year we have had the immense pleasure of getting to know our eight heroines: our Women on Walls. Dr Coffey, Dean Crowley, Dr Dickson, Dr Dunleavy, Dr Hannan, Sr and Dr Lynch, Dr Stokes and Dr Strangman, we are so proud to know you and honour you in this way.

And so, today we celebrate, and today, we commemorate.