

Sisters should do this for women of Ireland

IN many ways, the building of the new National Maternity Hospital on the St Vincent's site in Dublin appears to tick all the boxes. There is no dispute whatsoever, after all, that the current hospital in Holles Street has long been past its sell-by date, that its facilities are antiquated, and that it is no longer equipped to service the needs of the mothers and babies of this country. That we need a new maternity hospital – and as soon as possible – is therefore a given.

To have such a hospital co-located beside another major general hospital is also medically important. Indeed, in emergency situations, it is a vital requirement and potentially even life-saving. That the new hospital is to be built beside a general hospital such as St Vincent's is also, therefore, a huge plus.

So the notion that, without having to buy a site at huge expense to the State, we can still build a state-of-the-art maternity hospital right beside a reputable public hospital sounds like the best deal possible. On top of that, after much wrangling, the new hospital is said to have established a management structure that guarantees medical independence – to the degree that Master Rhona Mahony says she is perfectly happy with the situation.

Looking at the overall picture, it is therefore easy to understand why people would conclude that there are no obstacles here. Indeed, if the only concession is that the new hospital is nominally owned by St Vincent's, with the Government holding a golden share, then, on the surface, this does not appear to be an unreasonable proposition.

However, it has emerged that there are indeed serious concerns here. Those who have ownership of St Vincent's Hospital are the Sisters of Charity, who, in powerful detail, have set out how that hospital is to be run in accordance with their religious principles. As a result, certain procedures at variance with those Catholic principles are not carried out in St Vincent's, thereby illustrating how the owners are indeed exerting influence on the medicine practised in that hospital.

It is impossible, therefore, to expect that those same beliefs will not be brought to bear by the same owners when it comes to the governance of the new maternity hospital. The history of business tells us, time and again, that it is the owners who call the shots. In this situation that would obviously imply religious influence over medicine.

That is certainly what Peter Boylan, former Master of Holles Street and arguably the country's most respected obstetrician, is saying. That is precisely what he fears from this arrangement.

Meanwhile, one of the St Vincent's Healthcare Group board members, Sister Agnes Reynolds, has publicly stated that the Sisters of Charity will have no input into the running of the maternity hospital, and that they will 'respect the rights of mother and baby'. Yet, in itself, that very statement implies a degree of influence.

Nor should we forget that the Sisters of Charity have failed to pay the compensation required of them to the victims of their appalling Magdalene Laundries regime.

All of this raises major concerns in relation to the operation of the new maternity hospital. Obviously it is imperative that such a hospital is built, but with such misgivings now raised, the Government must explore other options, including the acquisition of the site by compulsory purchase order.

In reality, however, the simplest and best solution is for the Sisters of Charity to relinquish their ownership of the St Vincent's site. To do the right thing. And to give something valuable back to the women of Ireland.

Savita was told this is 'Catholic country' in a place NOT run by nuns. No wonder women are nervous

FIVE minutes after leaving my house, walking to the local Dart station, my foot went sideways in a crack on the footpath. I tried to break my fall but I went down hard, banging the side of my head and, because I had twisted slightly, landing on my right arm.

Dazed, I managed to pick myself up and get back home, whereupon the initial shock wore off and I realised my arm was broken. I managed to phone my father and he collected me and drove me to the nearest hospital, St Columille's in Loughlinstown, south Co. Dublin.

A&E wasn't packed, but it was busy. I went to the counter to register and, because I write with my right hand, the woman at the desk said she would fill out the form for me. We went through the usual questions – name, address, date of birth – and then, because it was my first time ever to visit a hospital in those circumstances, came a question that genuinely surprised me.

'What's your religion?' she asked. 'I beg your pardon?' I stuttered. 'What's your religion?' she repeated, with those in earshot all now suddenly quiet as they waited for the answer. 'What's that got to do with anything?' I asked, more bemused than anything else. 'You might need a priest,' she snapped. 'Will he be able to fix a broken arm, or do you think I'm going to die?' I smiled, and she said, 'there's no need to be smart'. I said, 'there's also no need for that question, so leave the box blank, please.' It was 1994 and, to be fair, things have changed, for me anyway. I've actually been hospitalised four times since, once with a genuinely life-threatening condition, and no one has asked me about religion at all, though perhaps my original reluctance to answer has followed me around on my records without my knowledge.

Mind you, on one of those occasions, I was operated on in Tarragona in Spain, in a hospital named after Pope John XXIII, and no one seemed bothered if I was Roman Catholic or followed any creed. Indeed, the young fella next to me in the excellent semi-private ward was a Moroccan Muslim who broke his leg playing football. All anyone really cared about was my EHIC, the European Health Insurance Card I hope you all carry when travelling, and details of my VHI Multi-Trip travel insurance policy.

Twice, though, I was in St Vincent's University Hospital in Dublin, which now finds itself at the centre of a growing controversy. It will be the location for the new National Maternity Hospital and, this week, it emerged the State will pay €300million to build the new facility, but that ownership of it will be handed to the Religious Sisters of Charity, the order that runs the St Vincent's Healthcare Group. The question many have been asking is why, when the order still owes €3million to the redress board dealing



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with institutional abuse, has it been gifted a hospital worth 100 times that? As one of the four orders that ran the infamous Magdalene laundries, its legacy attitude to women – especially women pregnant outside marriage – remains a stain on our national conscience that probably never will be erased. Dr Rhona Mahony, Master of the existing National Maternity Hospital in Holles Street (where I came bawling into the world), is adamant that, even with four people from St Vincent's on a nine-person board of management, there will be no interference by the nuns in medical matters.

Afraid

The previous Master, Dr Peter Boylan, is not convinced, and yesterday told RTE's Morning Ireland that it was 'inappropriate' for the Sisters of Charity to have influence over the hospital, especially given their 'bad history' in the past. He has a point. As things stand, St Vincent's does not carry out vasectomies or female sterilisation – routine procedures sought by many couples when they decide their families are large enough and don't want to rely for the rest of their fertile lives on barrier methods of contraception, or on hormonal drugs that might increase certain cancer risks.

That is a clear indication that a Catholic ethos prevails at the existing hospital, but Dr Mahony insists it will not pervade the new facility and that existing procedures available at Holles Street will continue to be performed. In this, she included terminations when the life of the mother is threatened, once they are in line with the terms of the Protection Of Life During Pregnancy Act 2013.

The controversy is unlikely to go away anytime soon. Indeed, a petition to block sole ownership of the new National Maternity Hospital by the Sisters of Charity had, at the time of writing, attracted almost 65,000 signatures, in little over 24 hours, a fairly emphatic pro-

test by those horrified that the nuns behind the Magdalene homes now would have any say in reproductive care.

But while that remains a valid subject for debate, there is another, far more fundamental, question to be asked, and that is whether religion should have any role – at all – in hospitals or healthcare? Religion and science have always been uneasy bedfellows, and religion tends to take a long time to catch up with scientific thinking and public acceptance of the latest developments. As Dr Boylan asked yesterday, what about abortion, IVF, gender realignment surgery? Again, he has a point. What if the Eighth Amendment actually was removed from the Constitution by referendum, and elective abortion became legal? Would the hospital perform terminations? Would certain board members allow it to?

Historically, the Church often was the only healthcare provider for the poor, and for that it must be thanked, but times have changed. It was a source of bemusement to me to be asked my religion when checking in to have a broken radius cast in plaster, but others being asked to state it publicly might either be embarrassed or afraid. You might believe everyone would receive adequate care anyway, until you remember that when Praveen Halappanavar begged for his wife Savita to have a termination before she died from sepsis, he was not told the procedure was 'illegal', but that 'Ireland is a Catholic country'. University Hospital Galway, where Savita's death occurred, is not run by a religious order, so if something like that could be said there, then it is entirely understandable why any pregnant women might feel nervous about entering a new National Maternity Hospital in which four members of the board of management were appointees of the Sisters of Charity.

Care protocols should be decided only by medical professionals, most of whom manage to be dispassionate enough about their personal religious beliefs to instead perform whatever procedure is medically necessary. It would be considered ludicrous for religious orders to run, say, a space programme attempting to send a mission to Mars, so why is it considered acceptable for them to supervise the branch of science that most affects our daily lives, namely medicine? There is a very simple way to end this controversy and to reassure everyone – potential parents, seriously ill pregnant women facing treatment for other conditions, and those who know they are carrying fetuses with fatal abnormalities – that their outcomes will not be affected by a religious ethos.

And that would be for the Sisters of Charity to look to their own name and perform the most charitable act of all. They should relinquish ownership of the hospital, hand it over to the State and, if they want to heal anything, set about healing souls, and leave qualified professionals – gynaecologists, doctors, midwives and nurses – to look after the pregnant, the sick and the dying.