

# The Changing Face Of Surgery

Widely regarded as one of the world's leading authorities on minimally invasive surgery, Patrick Leahy, the Galway consultant surgeon is revered internationally and lectures extensively abroad. Yet he wears his genius lightly



**Were it not for his love of hurling, Patrick Leahy would more than likely be a vet today, in wellingtons and a wax jacket, and channeling his expertise into animal care.**

But fate had different plans for him. Born in Loughrea, the second eldest of seven children, he was a lively child. "I was into doing things, causing trouble. I was creative, uncontrollable." He also had a natural flair for hurling, a sport which was to fashion the direction of his future.

"I wanted to study veterinary medicine when I left school, but I wanted to play hurling for Galway as well. Doing veterinary would have meant moving to Dublin so I opted for medicine at UCG instead."

His hurling career blossomed while at college. Leahy played left half back with his county at minor and under-21 levels. He made a number of appearances with the senior team and lined out with UCG's Fitzgibbon selection also.

After graduating in 1978 he did some

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post graduate training in Galway and Dublin before moving to Canada in 1983. It was at the University of Alberta that the eminent surgeon began to make his mark in the rapidly developing field of minimally invasive surgery. He was particularly interested in the laparoscopic technique – keyhole surgery – used to treat bowel disorders, hernias and gall bladder disease. Treating the latter involves making tiny incisions (the width of a thumb nail) outside the navel and inserting a telescope with a light source and camera. Surgeons can observe the patient's abdomen on a television monitor as they treat the problem. Unlike conventional methods, this offers rapid recovery and minimal pain and trauma. The concept captured Leahy's imagination. This was where his future, and that of

"Technology was very primitive then. I developed new equipment for minimally invasive surgery."

It was a journey into the unknown. "It's difficult to blaze a trail as you are alone and open to criticism. I was confident the results would be worthwhile but I never imagined this speciality would become so big."

His pioneering laparoscopic contributions and sophisticated laser techniques shot him to world prominence. He was awarded numerous honours and was invited to give lectures and surgical demonstrations all over the world.

"I travel less today. I'm still licensed to practice in the US and I work there and in Italy also."

Canada was slow to embrace medical change. "It was like Ireland, insular in many ways. It was conservative in its approach to new surgical procedures." New York was different. Leahy was invited there in 1989 to advance laser and minimally invasive surgical procedures at the Institute for the Advancement of Laser Surgery in Rochester University. The Americans, keen to nurture surgical innovation, welcomed him with open arms.

Patrick Leahy is media-shy but when cornered is frank, witty and engaging. He tries to play down his achievements but when pressed, recites them rapidly in prayer-like fashion. He visibly relaxes as the conversation amble innocuously around to alternative medicine (he's a big fan of it), Leonard Cohen (he didn't laser away any of the great Canadian singer's unwanted bits, in fact he never heard of him!) and left-handed surgeons (he isn't one and doesn't know anyone who is). He doesn't want to be photographed but is too polite to make a fuss. His admirers say he's unassuming and genuinely nice and his international reputation is unrivalled.

Leahy moved to Dublin in 1992 where he set up the Minimally Invasive Surgery Centre in Blackrock Clinic. He was later approached by Galvia Hospital and set up the west's first minimally invasive department with consultant surgeons John Nee and Noel Fitzpatrick. Since then, he has

their kind in Europe – in Dublin and more recently, in Galway at Seville House on New Docks Road.

He chose Galway "because I'm from Galway, of course. I wanted to come home!"

There is a big exodus away from conventional surgery, he says. It's good, well established and safe but can lead to complications, as the patient cannot mobilise quickly, he explains. "It's far better to minimize the trauma you cause to the body. Minimally invasive surgery make the procedure as painless as possible, reduces the time in hospital, is more cost effective and has fewer complications."

Mr Noel Fitzpatrick, a consultant surgeon, originally from the Aran Islands, and Patrick Leahy's business partner at the Laser Centre, agrees. Dispirited by the pain and big incisions often caused by invasive surgery, he was excited to learn about more patient – friendly methods. He trained in Amsterdam, at New York University and at the Laser Centre in Harvard. "I wanted to get away from using scalpels and leaving people with scars. A laser is the only tool that can do that as it allows us to operate without touching the body. When Patrick gave a talk in Galway I was instantly sold on the idea."

Laser Surgery is here to stay, both he and Leahy – the only two Irish surgeons focusing mainly on minimally invasive surgery – predict. Few doctors are following in their footsteps. Why? Many find it hard to depart from conventional wisdom, says Leahy.

The Galway Laser Centre provides various cosmetic treatments including the removal of wrinkles, port wine stain, warts, moles, tattoo, cysts and skin cancers. It also provides a hair transplant service and treats haemorrhoids. Internal upper gastrointestinal and bowel surgical procedures, are also performed by these specialists at Galvia Hospital. Patrick Leahy and Noel Fitzpatrick are considering setting up Laser Centres in Cork, Belfast, Amsterdam and Belgium.

Leahy would like to see the medical profession be more transparent and work at de-mystifying surgery. "Patients are more questioning now and seek the best therapies. I'd like to see more doctors explain the disadvantages of some types of surgery to them