

# ‘This morning I did a bypass. For those four hours I don’t think of anything else’

## THIS WORKING LIFE

DR NIAMH KEENAN

The lead for the new service in Mater Private Cork chats with *Mary McCarthy* about the moment she knew she wanted to be a surgeon and easing patients’ concerns

### Heart matters

A coronary artery bypass is the most common operation I do. While heart disease like this can be managed with tablets, stents and surgery, by the time the patient comes to see me all of these options will have been discussed at a multidisciplinary team meeting and the patient is coming to chat about surgery.

Outside of work, people often ask me about heart health. It is a big thing to happen to you or someone you know and I’m happy to help where I can.

### Medical family

I grew up in Tipperary, a mile outside Cashel. I enjoyed science and maths; I was probably quite nerdy.

My dad is a GP and my mother was a nurse and there are many doctors in my family. Though, if anything, my family warned me that medicine was going to be a difficult path. I initially wanted to do pharmacy or human genetics, but it was always something medical. I have two brothers and one sister and I was the only one to go into healthcare.

When I started medicine in UCD in 1998 it was not as integrated as now. For the first four years we were in labs and lectures and after this we did our hospital rotations.

I found I really enjoyed being in the operating theatre. I can remember when I knew I wanted to go into surgery. One day I saw a great abdominal surgery and found it fascinating. Walking in the corridor after with an intern, he turned to me and said, “you really want to be a surgeon, don’t you?”

There are quite a few women working in cardiothoracic surgery in Ireland. In

my second year of higher surgical training here, four out of the seven trainees were women.

Like all jobs, the work needs to be more family friendly, more life friendly for everyone, and I do think medicine is adapting.

### Training

I graduated in 2004. I had a lot of fun at UCD. When you are doing something like medicine there is such a huge amount of study, it means you become very good friends with your classmates. The intensity brings you together. Our class had our 20-year reunion last year and it was wonderful catching up.

We did our intern year after graduating. I then did two years of basic surgical training, two years of research and two years of cardiothoracic surgical training in Dublin. Then I spent seven years in Australia. I qualified from there and had to make a decision. Do I stay in Australia or come home?

When I left in my early 30s, none of my siblings had children, but then my sister married and had a baby and it was a different time for my family. I spent six months in the UK at a hospital in Cambridge and then came home. I’ve been back in Ireland for five years now.

I was in St James’s Hospital for a year and a half and then I taught in the Royal College of Surgeons for over a year. I started in the Mater Private Hospital in Dublin almost three years ago.

We’ve been planning to open a cardiac surgical unit in Cork for some time, and I’ve been very involved with that project. For two years, I came to Cork once a week to meet the patients before and after their surgery, but their operation was in Dublin.

We did the first heart surgery in Mater Private Cork in November 2024, and I’ve been full time in Cork since then. I’ve just bought a house, which is very exciting.

### Average day

If it is a theatre day, like it was today, I am up around 6am and I listen to the radio on the drive into the hospital for

7am when I pop up to the ward to say hello to the patient.

It is a nerve-wracking time for them, and I think they appreciate seeing a familiar face.

The patient went down to the theatre and was with the anaesthetist for about an hour. I’m not needed at this stage, so I had a team meeting with the cardiologists to discuss other cases.

Then I went to theatre and got started. This morning I was doing a bypass operation. It took four hours. I am very focused then, I don’t think of anything else. It is only afterward that I realise I might be hungry or thirsty.

I would like to play music in theatre – we did this all the time in Australia. But I’ve just started with a new team here and we are growing together – I think music would be a distraction.

When I was in Melbourne, we used to play Ed Sheeran or a chilled 90s playlist. I worked with a surgeon who would only play Coldplay or U2, and another surgeon who liked a lot of hard dance tracks, which could be stressful.

The surgery today was over around 2pm. How I feel after can depend, but generally I’m pleased it’s gone well. I’m always aware things can change during the operation.

We dropped our patient to intensive care where he will stay asleep for a couple of hours. I wrote up his operative note and then spoke to his family. I will pop back over to him later when he wakes.

I love hearing from the patients after they recover. I love getting a card, it is really nice to have them, I keep them all. Knowing you have made a difference to a family, that’s so special.

One patient sent me a postcard from walking the Camino six months after his surgery. It is the best feeling to get a card like that. You have gotten them back to their normal life, this is what I am always aiming for.

We usually have two operations if it is a theatre day. In Cork we are still doing one a day, as a new team, it’s important we start safely, and just focus on the one patient. As we grow we will move to two cases a day.



For most it is planned surgery, though some patients might come in for an angiogram, or with symptoms, and they stay and have surgery a few days later.

On non-theatre days I have clinics and see patients before their surgery. When meeting a new patient, we spend up to an hour chatting.

They are nervous, there is a lot to take in. I will go through their history and the problem with their heart. We talk about the operation, the risks and recovery.

We also do a lot of continuous education and development in medicine. It could be a quality improvement meeting or providing training to the team on patient care.

## On call

On the days we operate I always have my phone on. On other days, my colleague and I share on-call, one of us is always available to cover the patients in the hospital. On the weekends it is similar, I might go in on a Saturday to do ward rounds if I have patients that need to be seen as we will all be working to get them ready towards going home.

Because I usually operate on a Monday morning I like to nip in on a Sunday night. Just to make sure the patient is ready, and answer any final questions they might have.

The week is variable. On other days, such as a Thursday, I often head home a bit earlier. I might meet a friend for coffee or go to the gym.

I could be in quite late on other days. This is my life and has been for a long time. I am used to it. Unless on holidays, I don't really ever turn off my phone.

As lead for the new service in Mater Private Cork, I feel very responsible for it and want to make sure I am approachable, that people can call me, even for something minor. So I make myself available.

In Australia, the culture was great, very collegiate, with an emphasis on

work-life balance. I try to do the same here in Cork. The cardiac surgical team are all on a first-name basis. I see us as a team, all working towards excellent patient outcomes, just doing different roles to achieve that.

I'm not using AI, but I expect it will start to come through for us, for example in documenting our conversations with patients.

Technology continues to evolve and improve in the management of heart disease. For example, the newer replacement valves we're now using will hopefully last longer for patients.

## Management and prevention

No single blood test will show you have heart disease.

The most important thing is to look at lifestyle. Aim for a Mediterranean diet with lots of fruits, veg, olive oil and nuts. Get your exercise, do resistance training, stop smoking. These things are within your control.

After that if you are worried, particularly if you have a family history, talk to your GP who could advise on other risk factors, such as your blood pressure or cholesterol levels.

There is a lot of information out there, the Irish Heart Foundation has a great website. If you are having symptoms of shortness of breath or chest pain, it is so important to get checked out.

## A heart surgeon's lifestyle

I love my morning coffee. I have breakfast at home – porridge or Greek yoghurt with fruit, I make my own granola with nuts and seeds and have that on top.

For lunch it's soup from home with brown bread, or something from the night before. I had a black bean chilli last night so I will have that today when I grab a break.

I tend towards vegetarian or fish or chicken at home. It could be lentil ragu,

or chicken or fish with baked potatoes and salad.

I batch cook so on operating days when I am home late I have dinners in the freezer.

In Cork I live near Dunnes in Bish-  
opstown and there is a fishmonger, K  
O'Connell – that does great Asian tuna  
or hake with breadcrumbs.

Towards the weekend I often go out and might have a nice steak then.

I do like a glass of wine on the week-ends. It is about sharing food and chats with friends and family. In Australia I loved visiting the vineyards, which was all about the stories, the people, the land.

I do love all the things that are bad for me and try to limit them to the week-ends – Butlers chocolates or a Dairy Milk – and I can never resist dessert when out.

I love chatting for ages over tea with family and friends. To relax, I go on long walks, and I read. I like fiction, like Cathy Kelly or Jodi Picoult, or sometimes something with a psychology or sociology aspect to it. I loved Malcolm Gladwell's books.

I make the most of my time off. I'm off to Texas soon for a cousin's wedding, and last year I went to Uganda with my brother to see the gorillas, which was incredible.

I do find it hard to wind down fully, what I do is quite intense and quite involved.

When I travel somewhere new, that is when I can fully switch off. So, I love to do that.

***“One patient sent me a postcard from walking the Camino after his surgery. It's the best feeling”***



**Dr Niamh Keenan spent seven years in Australia before making the decision to return home.** Photo: Darragh Kane