



Local Hero

Patrick O’Rahilly at his pharmacy in Finglas East, North Dublin.

This essay was written by Helen O’Rahilly and was originally broadcast as part of RTÉ Radio One’s *Sunday Miscellany* series. Ms O’Rahilly is a former TV Executive with BBC and RTÉ, who has recently returned to Dublin after 30 years in London. Her father was Patrick O’Rahilly, MPSI. He died in 1993.

We’ve discovered a new breed of hero recently: we knew medics were always heroes but joining them now are cleaners, bus drivers, bin men, checkout staff, shelf stackers and truck drivers.

One job perhaps has been overlooked: the local pharmacist. My late Dad Patrick was one, although in his day he was known as a chemist. That was in his era from the 1950s to the 1980s when he ran a huge corner shop on McKee and Clune Roads in Finglas East, North Dublin.

A rented space for 20 plus years, it had a doubled-windowed glass edifice. Inside

was packed with display stands of Max Factor lipsticks and Pablum and Cow & Gate baby foods. The interior smelled of Yardley’s Lily of the Valley for the mummies, and Blue Stratos for the lads.

Behind the front-of-house cosmetics and perfumes, behind a vast 20 by 6 foot wooden partition, was the inner sanctum where Dad performed his alchemy. Powders were measured and mixed, ointments were blended on a large marble slab; his deft use of a palette knife would have made him a perfect candidate for a Bake Off TV show.

He had a wonderful flourish as he cut sparkling medicinal powders into the emollient cream of Silcock’s Base. Knee high to the belt of his starched

white coat, I'd peer over the top of the work surface as Dad meticulously scraped every ounce of a creamy potion into a sterile glass jar. With his ink pen, he'd write specific instructions on the labels of each bottle, jar and packet for each patient.

He'd take one step sideways to his thick, leather-bound ledger and enter the formulas and dispensed amounts, with their correct Latin abbreviations: A.C – 'ante cibum' (before meals); E.M.P – ex modo prescript (in the manner prescribed); U.M.G – unguentum (ointment); Q.I.D – Quater in Die (four times a day) and so on . . .

Dad was known as the 'Lord Mayor of Finglas' by his customers. He handed out prescribed medicines to those left penniless by a strike at a local engineering plant and say "pay me when you can"; he'd sit with crying women whose men had disappeared and left them with young kids; he'd make tea for a lonely widower and sit with him behind the counter watching a tiny Black & White Pye TV where the horse racing would always be on, the two of them chatting about weights and hard-gong.

From two large glass screw-top jars in front of his cash register, any kid in the shop would get an orange or blackcurrant barley stick, gratis.

I helped out in the shop from the age of 13. Just till work or helping a girl choose a lipstick. The only warning Dad gave me was to watch out for any male who came into the shop wearing a motorcycle helmet. No, they weren't go to rob us, they'd just ask for Dad and wouldn't deal with me. I learned later that it was because these shy young men were looking for contraceptives and didn't want to show their faces and certainly not to me, a teenage shop girl.

The main rule was never go near the medicines. I'd learned the hard way when I was just 6. Many of Dad's customers had moved to the then new suburb of Finglas from far away counties in the 1950s. Those locals often brought back a little treat for Dad when they'd been home visiting Donegal, Connemara, Mayo or Kerry: a plastic Virgin Mary filled with holy water. Dad had accumulated football teams of Virgin Marys stored under a low counter, with the odd obscure Saint in there

too. Thinking I'd make myself holier one day, I opened and drank the watery contents from one of the Virgins. It wasn't Holy Water, it was Poitin. I had to be pumped out. Never again would I open a vial, a bottle or a plastic religious figure.

Dad's own cough mixture – O'Rahilly's Balsam – was a top seller. It's no wonder: it had morphine in it. In those days chemists were allowed to make up their own variations of cough mixtures. Dad's version outsold the mega brands of Benylin and Actifed. It was so popular, the local wags said he should have sold it in six packs.

There was a constant demand for fortified and tonic wines, mostly from women who'd hide the brown-paper wrapped bottle deep in their shopping bags. Prescriptions for Valium went through the roof, masking, we now know, all sorts of heartache going on behind the net curtains of suburban Dublin.

Dad also saw the start of the heroin epidemic as addicts began to trickle into the shop for 'DF118' – Dihydrocodeine – a powerful analgesic with the kick of both morphine and codeine. If they couldn't get

We'd like to hear from you

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it on prescription, they broke through the shop's huge plate glass windows in the middle of the night.

Dad's chemist shop was burgled more than 20 times as the drug epidemic took hold. One desperate young lad, off his head, shredded himself on the window shards. The Finglas Gardai followed the trail of blood he left behind and took him to the Mater Hospital.

In a strange twist, the young intern on night duty who stitched him up was my own brother. When he heard the Guards say it was 'O'Rahilly's on McKee Road' that had been burgled – for the third time that month – the brother said it strained his Hippocratic Oath to 'do no harm'.

Chemists, Pharmacists. It's not just soap and Solpadeine. It's Warfarin and wise words; Amoxicyllin and advice. Dad used to say 'Ah, sure, I'm only a lipstick seller'. He wasn't. He was a local hero. Here's to all the chemists, pharmacists and assistants – local heroes, all.

Pictured left: Patrick O'Rahilly with his daughter Helen. Pictured below: Patrick takes a selfie reflected in the window of his pharmacy in Finglas.



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