

Text of the introductory address delivered by: **DR CAROLINE HUSSEY**, on 7 April, 2006, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Medicine, *honoris causa*, on **MICHAEL ELMORE MEEGAN**



A Sheansailéir, agus a mhuintir na hOllscoile,

Dr Michael Elmore Meegan has spent most of his working life in Africa. Growing up in what he aptly describes as, “the cosy, leafy suburb” of Terenure, he attended Terenure College where his parents were teachers. Armed only with a degree in Philosophy, he first went to Africa in 1979, where he worked with Joe Barnes, now Professor Emeritus of Tropical Medicine in RCSI. With Dr Barnes, and two other Irish doctors, he founded ICROSS, the *International Community for the Relief of Starvation and Suffering*, a small international charity fighting poverty and disease.

Mike Meegan’s work in Kenya was the subject of a recent award-winning RTE documentary *When you Say Four Thousand Goodbyes* which vividly conveys the heart-breaking beauty of Maasailand and its people, but also the appalling poverty, morbidity and mortality in local communities - the title refers to the number of children Mike has watched die. One of the film’s memorable images is of a dead child, carefully covered in a mosquito net as he awaits burial – the child had died of malaria because his family couldn’t afford bed nets.

The scale of Africa’s health problems is overwhelming: more than 350 million Africans suffer from malaria; 25 million have contracted AIDS; there are 1.5 million new cases of TB each year. In Africa, disease is not only a health problem, it is also a major cause of poverty; AIDS, for example, has devastated the social economy of many communities by wiping out an entire generation of breadwinners.

Mike Meegan believes that public health interventions are sustainable only when based on traditional values and skills. ICROSS builds on the indigenous resources of poor, marginalised communities to grow capacity to manage their own health and livelihoods, emphasising consultation, training and empowerment. This requires communication (Mike speaks nine languages), adopting community values, identifying traditional service providers, and adapting and supporting their traditional modes of service delivery. This sustainability contrasts with what one of Mike’s collaborators calls “the rusting hulks” of many other development projects, where western values and technologies, parachuted into traditional communities, foundered when foreign money dried up and aid workers went home.

The work of Mike Meegan and other ICROSS volunteers involves deeply personal care for individuals, emotional engagement and strong commitment to the dignity of every human person, be it a man dying of AIDS, a woman who has been raped or an orphaned child. However, ICROSS's caring ministry is also underpinned by a strong research philosophy. Recognising the importance of scientific methods in the fight against poverty and disease, Mike made the decision to undertake postgraduate study in medical science, leading to a Masters in Community Health and a PhD in Medical Anthropology.

Believing that "research without practical application is unethical", ICROSS research addresses problems of people living in poverty: the dynamics of illness and death in communities crippled by famine and drought. Projects combine the expertise of academics - clinicians, statisticians, anthropologists, psychologists - with the insight and experience of field workers in Africa and Asia. All research results, from epidemiology to sociology, influence ICROSS's strategy against poverty and disease.

Medical research is often synonymous with sophisticated techniques, such as genomics and proteomics, so it is refreshing to know that "low tech" research can make a dramatic difference to the health of millions. When laboratory equipment can cost millions, it is startling to find that a discarded bottle can be a powerful research tool. Water is an essential for all life, but when all life - people, domestic and wild animals, share the same water source, water can rapidly become a vector of death and disease. The disinfecting power of sunlight was known to the ancient Egyptians. Mike and his collaborators have reinvented solar disinfection in Kenya, using the humble plastic bottle (ironically, usually a discarded container for bottled water); exposure to sunlight for a short period kills infectious agents and renders the water drinkable. The EU has recently funded ICROSS to roll out this technology in Kenya, Zimbabwe and South Africa.

As a medical scientist, Mike Meegan understands the importance of evaluation: 'we will not know where we are going unless we know where we started from'. Mike and ICROSS work with communities for the long haul, which facilitates longitudinal studies of the effectiveness of public health initiatives. For example, a 20-year study of the effectiveness of interventions, by tribal birth attendants, on neonatal mortality, recently published in *The Lancet*, showed a sustained, consistent 90% improvement.

Despite working 24/7, Mike makes time for reflection, which finds expression in his sculpture and writings. In his recent book, *All will be Well*, he claims "We have no heroes any more, only celebrities." His own work disproves this claim. In the relentless fight against

poverty and disease, Dr Mike Meegan has demonstrated sustained heroism in the face of the enemy.

Praehonorabilis Cancellarie, totaque universitas. Presento vobis hunc meum filium, quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in Medicina, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.