

**OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN**  
**NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND**

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

**LINDA O'SHEA FARREN** on 6 NOVEMBER 2025 in the Aviva Stadium, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Science, *honoris causa*, on **EMER COOKE**

A Sheansailéir, a mhuintir na hOllscoile, a mhuintir Cooke agus a dhaoine uaisle,

Mar úrlabhraí díograiseach ar son rochtain ar ábhair STEM do mhná in Éirinn, táim bródúil Emer Cooke a chur i láthair mar fhaighteoir don ghradam is airde gur féidir le hOllscoil na hÉireann a bhronnadh, an Dochtúireacht Oinigh. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil Gaeilge líofa ag Emer mar is i nGaeltacht Chonamara a bhuaile mé léi nuair a bhíomar beirt inár ndéagóirí - ní inniu ná inné a bhí sin - agus scoláire díocasach Gaeilge ba ea í gan amhras.

Chancellor, members of the university community, Cooke family, ladies and gentlemen, as a passionate advocate for access to STEM subjects for women in Ireland, I am proud to present Emer Cooke as a recipient of the highest award that the National University of Ireland can bestow, an Honorary Doctorate. I know that Emer is fluent in Irish because we met in the Gaeltacht in Connemara when we were both teenagers - that's not today or yesterday - and she was undoubtedly a keen scholar of Irish.

In fact, Aibhlín McCrann's family were also regulars in Rosmuc. Mar sin, tá go leor Gaeilge ag na céimithe ar an ardán seo inniu; dóthain le haghaidh Áras an Uachtaráin cinnte. I refer here, of course, to the Presidential sine qua non of being fluent in our native tongue.

Emer Cooke has had a glittering career over 40 years in the crucial field of regulation of medicines, with more than 18 of these years in leadership roles. Rising to the highest echelons in Europe, Emer was appointed Executive



Director of the European Medicines Agency in November 2020. She is the first woman Executive Director of the EMA, succeeding Italian, Swedish and French men in the role before her.

Founded in 1995, the EMA has a 30-year track record of ensuring efficacy and safety of human and veterinary medicines across Europe, and promoting research and innovation in the development of medicines. Its work enables 450 million EU citizens - and countless animals - in Europe and beyond to benefit from innovative medicines authorised centrally. We are all now at a safe distance from what was undoubtedly one of the biggest challenges the world has faced in recent times, the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic.

The National University of Ireland honours Emer Cooke today particularly - but not only - for her leadership in stewarding the passage of scientific research and innovation through the regulation process, which allowed the development and roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines in record time, thereby saving millions of lives worldwide. Emer's first day in this pivotal role was 16th November 2020 and - as the world was in lockdown, hospitals were overrun and people were dying in tragically sad numbers - the first job in her inbox was approval of the breakthrough COVID-19 vaccine.

Emer grew up in Dublin, the third of seven children, most of whom are here today. Their parents, Paddy and Ann, worked in the fields of civil engineering and dentistry, respectively, and with siblings who were also high achievers academically, Emer was not short of role models. In fact, Emer attributes her 'secret sauce' in regulation - that is, being able to distill a common, and acceptable, approach from multiple divergences - to the fact that she grew up at the centre of a typically large family of its time in Ireland. Not only did Emer excel across the spectrum of her studies at Muckross Park College but, in a bit of a 'boss move' in its day, she was a founding member of the gymnastics club there. No doubt the fancy footwork that Emer learned as a gymnast came in handy when navigating the regulatory landscape across Europe and beyond. A keen hillwalker these days, Emer is currently taking a handstand class with a view to getting her form back in gymnastics.

Graduating in pharmacy from Trinity College Dublin in 1982, Emer has two Master's degrees - in Science (1985) and in Business Administration (1991) - also from Trinity. Why pharmacy? Emer says that, as she left school when Ireland was in economic turmoil - at the height of the so-called 'brain drain' - she chose pharmacy because there was a shortage of community pharmacists at the time and what she wanted most, at that stage in her life, was a steady job. At the start of her career, Emer held a number of roles in the Irish pharmaceutical sector, including two years as a Pharmaceutical Assessor at what is now the

Health Products Regulatory Agency (HPRA) (1985 to 1991). She married Peter Dempsey, a UCD law graduate.

After they left Ireland, Emer's career brought them to Brussels (where their twin children, Anna and Conor, were born), London, Prague, Geneva and Amsterdam - a veritable Eurail Pass journey for all the family across Continental Europe. In Brussels, Emer was Manager of Scientific and Regulatory Affairs at the European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries and Associations (EFPIA) (1992 to 1998), alongside work as an Independent Pharmaceutical Policy Advisor in Prague. This was followed by a management position in the Pharmaceuticals Unit of the European Commission (1998 to 2022) in Brussels, where Emer was responsible for international collaboration, EU enlargement and legislative initiatives including in relation to regulation of so-called 'orphan' medicinal products for treatment of rare diseases. Emer first joined the European Medicines Agency in London 23 years ago, where she served sequentially as Head of Inspections (2002 to 2008); International Liaison Officer (2008 to 2012) and, ultimately, Head of International Affairs (2012 to 2016).

In the immediate aftermath of the Brexit vote, but not because of it, Emer left London to take up the role of Director of Regulation of Medicines and other Health Technologies at the World Health Organisation's headquarters in Geneva (2016 to 2020). Her four years at the WHO encompassed the late stages of the Ebola outbreak in West Africa and the early stages of COVID-19. Returning to the European Medicines Agency as a 'boomerang' employee, when Emer took up her current role as Executive Director in November 2020 (2020 to date), the organisation had by then moved to Amsterdam post-Brexit. As the blowtorch of the COVID-19 crisis burned white hot, Emer's world became one of immense pressure, intense press queries, global misinformation and angry protestors. As Emer says, by way of proof that regulation of medicines had become a hot topic, taxi drivers in Dublin - whom we all know to be the ultimate barometer - were all over it.

Alongside her role as Executive Director of the EMA for the past five years, Emer has also served as Chair of the International Coalition of Medicines Regulatory Authorities (ICMRA). When her 5-year term chairing ICMRA ended a few days ago, she was bestowed with an award in recognition of her outstanding contribution to international cooperation and the advancement of the organisation's mission. When asked about her stellar career, Emer modestly maintains that career development is more about luck and opportunity than it is about good planning. And that good timing often matters more than a good idea. She believes in taking all the help offered to you, and then paying it forward by helping others. And her advice to women is don't be afraid to stand out.

Literally. As in, never wear black when you are in a large professional group of men, and dare to wear those shoes! The burning question is who will play Emer's role in the Netflix series: The Anna Wintour of Medicines Regulation? My vote is for Keira Knightley.

In early May 2023, when the World Health Organisation declared an end to the COVID-19 public health emergency, in a statement issued by Emer as Executive Director of the EMA, she said: 'The last three years have tested the regulatory system to its limits but, as the pandemic comes to an end, we have come out undoubtedly stronger, more coordinated both at EU and international level, and better prepared for future crises.' She likes to remind people that 'it was science that developed the vaccine breakthroughs, it was science that freed us from lockdowns and it was scientists who gave us trusted, factual information when it mattered most.'

In thanking all involved, Emer spoke of their unwavering commitment to public health that has made Europe proud. Emer, the cardinal role that you played in shepherding vaccines through a rigorous regulatory process with the safest of hands, and strengthening collaboration with leaders of regulatory authorities around the world to bring this public health emergency under control, is a source of great pride in Ireland.

Go raibh míle maith agat, a Emer, as ucht seirbhís phoiblí den chéad scoth a dhéanamh ar an stáitse domhanda.

#### **PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:**

**Praesento vobis hanc meam filiam, quem scio tam moribus quam  
doctrina habilem et idoneam esse quae admittatur, honoris causa, ad  
gradum Doctoratus Scientiae, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo,  
totique Academiae.**