

Chancellor Dharker,

Graduates, esteemed colleagues, family and friends, take a moment to look around our community in this beautiful hall. If you are a woman, or care about one, Professor Dame Lesley Regan has touched your life. Through a career characterised by optimism and determination, Lesley has worked to improve the health and lives of women of all ages.

Lesley was born in London in 1956 the eldest of two children. The generations before her had lacked the educational opportunities that today we might take for granted: her father had moved to London with his mother, at age 12, and went out to work to support her, and indeed Lesley realised only later that her grandmother had herself been illiterate. Perhaps because of this, her father firmly believed in the education of girls. He told Lesley there was 'nothing she couldn't do'. She took this to heart and was only 7 when, being a patient at the allergy clinic at St Mary's, she resolved that she was going to be a doctor. Determined from a young age, Lesley overcame early difficulties with maths and physics with the support of her father and an inspirational teacher, Mr Mercer. How proud her grandmother, father and teachers would be to know how much Lesley has achieved.

Lesley attended the Royal Free Medical School, graduating in 1980. She told me that, while studying medicine was hard work it was also a privilege. During her training, she met the remarkable obstetrician Luba Epzstejn who was to become her mentor. An Eastern European Jewish woman who had travelled to the UK in 1939, Luba had funded her way through medical school playing, and presumably winning, poker. The young Lesley had intended to become a psychiatrist, but Luba had other ideas and so began Lesley's distinguished career in Obstetrics and Gynaecology. I believe we all owe Luba a debt of gratitude.

From the beginning, Lesley started to work on the important issues that affect 51% of the population but were seldom talked about: menstruation, recurrent miscarriage and menopause. Life in medicine was not easy, not everyone shared her father's view. In her recording for BBC Desert Island Discs, Lesley recalled that in her first surgery job the consultant wouldn't speak to her, he believed that 'women had no place in surgery'. That determination showed again as Lesley gained a surgical fellowship and it would, in time, take her to the highest levels of her profession, showing that there is no place that is 'no place for a woman'.

Today, Professor Dame Lesley Regan is Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at Imperial College's St Mary's Hospital. In 2016 she became only the second woman, and the first for 64 years, to be elected President of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. Her appointment required a few adjustments: a new ceremonial robe, the existing one worn by her many male predecessors being dangerously long, and a step so she could be seen over the College lectern.

During her tenure as President Lesley appointed Kate Lancaster as CEO to the College. Kate was a Chief Executive with 30-year experience in the NHS. She had not planned a career change, however one conversation with Lesley and Kate decided, "I need to work with this woman. She was going to 'turn the dial on women's health and I wanted to be part of that."

At the end of her tenure as President in 2020 Lesley was appointed a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire for services to women's health.

As president, Lesley had published the Better for Women report, which called for a national strategy to address the UK's growing gender health gap. That vision helped shape the Women's Health Strategy for England and led to her appointment as England's first Women's Health Ambassador, a role she continues to hold. Her appointment gave a powerful signal for women's health.

Colleagues said, "Lesley has remarkable intellect and drive, she inspires others to bring their best to a problem, she is also impatient, she starts each day thinking what will she do today to improve health for women".

Fortunately, not everyone subscribed to the view of that consultant in her early training. Among her many supporters was Newcastle graduate Sir Eric Thomas, a champion of women who recognised her talent early. In 2025 Lesley visited Newcastle University to deliver the inaugural Sir Eric Thomas Memorial Lecture 'Why every nation should invest in a women's health strategy'.

In her turn, Dame Lesley is generous with her support for other women in their careers. Prof Raneer Thaker credits Lesley with encouraging and supporting her towards her subsequent Presidency of the Royal College.

Lesley's clinical and research work continues to help individual women, she has many scientific publications and citations; for many that would be enough, but not for Lesley. Lesley has a passion for communicating to the wider public. Her two books *"Your Pregnancy Week by Week: What to Expect from Conception to Birth"* and *"Miscarriage: What Every Woman Needs to Know"* are international bestsellers.

A pivotal moment for Lesley was hearing Sir Michael Marmot discuss his work on the wider determinants of health. As Lesley told me, "He blew me away". Inspired by the idea that health is shaped by the conditions in which people live and work, she became determined to become an advocate for all women's health across the life course. For the first time in history women live longer beyond their reproductive years than in them, they live longer than men, but they spend more years in poor health. Lesley has twin daughters Jenny and Clare; it is for her daughters and for all women that Lesley strives.

Through the Women's Health Strategy, Lesley continues to drive change including the development of Women's Health Hubs across the country. When

our North-East Integrated Care Board launched the implementation of the plan for our region, Lesley travelled north to lend her support. She is also an advocate for the new Maternal Disparities Consortium led by our Professor of Perinatal Health, Judith Rankin.

Lesley's colleagues describe her as the ultimate communicator, equally at home advising ministers, supporting clinicians, or listening to women in settings as diverse as community projects and prisons. Whoever she is speaking to, she has a remarkable ability to make them feel they are the most important person in the room.

Lesley is Chair of Wellbeing of Women, the charity funding research, education and advocacy into every aspect of women's health. Her friend in the charity, Janet Lindsay, told me that wherever they go, someone will approach Lesley to say, "you won't remember me or you don't know me, but you helped me have a baby". Any parent knows how much that that means.

Away from work, Lesley enjoys good company, good music and opening her home to friends and colleagues. She is as likely to be found at the Proms as dancing with her daughters at ABBA Voyage. Yet, for all her achievements, what she is most proud of is Jenny and Clare 'her girls'.

Chancellor Dharker, Lesley's career has been shaped by her optimism, her unwillingness to take no for an answer and remembering her own father's message that there is nothing she couldn't do. In recognition of her achievements and service to medicine, I present to you Professor Dame Lesley Regan as a candidate for the award of Doctor of Medicine, *honoris causa*.

Citation by Professor Ashley Adamson, Public Orator

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