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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Mark Cormack', written over a horizontal line.

Date

9 AUGUST 2012

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**Health Workforce Australia CEO, Mark Cormack**

**Occasional Address, Graduation Ceremony**

**University of South Australia**

**Adelaide Festival Centre, Adelaide**

**3.00 pm, 7 August 2012**

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First, I would like to acknowledge that we are meeting on the traditional land of the Kaurna (pronounced Garna) people and pay our respects to their elders both past and present.

Chancellor, Dr Ian Gould

Vice Chancellor, Professor Peter Høj

Members of Council

Doctors, Emeritus Professors, Fellows and senior  
management

Staff of the university

Graduands, and ladies and gentlemen

*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times*

*it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of  
despair*

*we had everything before us, we had nothing  
before us*

*we were all going direct to heaven, we were  
all going direct the other way*

So says Charles Dickens in his famous book – more quoted, I think, than read – *A Tale of Two Cities*.

His tale is about France in the lead-up to the French Revolution. He describes a nation that was at odds with itself. Its citizens were experiencing the extremes of life... and their views were seemingly irreconcilable.

For my money, he could be describing – albeit in poetic superlatives - the Australia of today.

On the one hand, we bask in the glow of the mining boom. Two decades of largely uninterrupted growth, the lowest headline inflation

in 13 years and unemployment at a mere 5.2 per cent.

At the same, the global financial crisis. We have tightened our belts, slashed government budgets, displaced thousands of public sector jobs. We see a similar loss of prospects in the manufacturing and retail sectors.

Those enjoying the benefits of the resources boom are zooming around at Formula One speeds. But if you're stuck in first gear, going up Willunga Hill in a 1994 Suzuki Alto – possibly with no heating – then the resources boom has passed you by.

It is the two-speed economy.

It affects states, it affect individuals and communities.

In public debate today there is also a growing chasm.

I can think of no better example than the issue of refugees coming in poorly equipped boats to Australia.

One view is that all boats must be turned back to Indonesia. The other view is adamant that all refugees must be welcomed without constraint.

There seems to be no middle ground between these two poles... and apparently little prospect of there being any.

We as a nation are polarised on the issue... And as we stick to our poles , misery and death accrue to mark our intransigence.

I will not be going into the rights and wrongs of the argument. I am no expert in the area.

But I do know this... that entrenched and polarised views never solve what your lecturers might call 'wicked problems'.

I know this from experience as the CEO of an organisation committed to improving healthcare for all Australians by building a better health workforce... and as someone with a long career in trying to progress change.

The term 'entrenched' couldn't make it clearer.



It derives from military conflict.

Picture the First World War, the muddy fields, the soldiers on both sides dug into wet, seeping trenches, trying desperately to stay alive.

In the middle, between the warrens of trenches, is **no man's land**. Barbed wire, lethal open space, perhaps the remains of soldiers whose bodies have not yet been removed.

That is where entrenched positions get you – no man's land.

I believe that not one of us here is interested in an Australia in which there are two speeds - especially when we have the wealth and the resources to ensure the wellbeing of all.

Similarly I doubt that there is anyone here who believes that occupying the extreme poles in any argument or issue is going to get you very far.

And I don't believe any of us want to see the political debate so dug in that we can't find our way back to the surface.

I have learned this from my own experience.

I never set out to be a leader in the health sector nor in health reform.

I grew up in Western Sydney and I was set on going to university to study law and economics.

I finished year 12 – known as the HSC – and did well enough to get the Economics / Law offer from the University of Sydney.

But, after those years of wanting and waiting, I declined.

Why?

I declined because during the lead-up to my HSC I injured my hand and this gave me a first-hand acquaintance with the health system. I got to see the inside of a hospital on several occasions, had a few operations, and months of treatment.

I was so taken with what I saw and learned – as a patient – that I marched away from law and

stumbled into the health professions... speech pathology in fact.

So I started from an aspiration in law, then to the health professions, to managing health services, a stint as a lobbyist, running a health jurisdiction and from there to national health policy, leadership and reform.

These experiences have built my taste and resolve for reform and change.

They have also taught me how best to achieve reform and change... or in some cases rather... how NOT to achieve them... an equally important learning.

This takes me back to entrenched views. Too often we are faced with the either or option. We do this... or we do that.

“Poles apart” as the saying goes....and “ne’er the twain shall meet” to quote another.

The result – too often – is that we do nothing at all.

I want to encourage you to consider a different way forward – let us accept both...

and – let us reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable.

Let’s never simply accept that any view is totally right... or totally wrong

... a hard position to take , when you know... or think you know... that you are right...

...but by accepting the possibility of a better space... a space between the poles, that's how we avoid no man's land....and that's how we lose less people at sea.

Let me give you a practical example from my current work, and the world that you are now entering.

In the health sector there is growing demand for health services... from a population that is ageing, has an increasing burden of chronic disease, and has higher expectations of service.

The result is mounting strain, including financial and workforce, on our health system.

There are choices to be made... for the health professional... where to best spend your time, effort and skills... and for the patient or consumer... who to entrust with your deeply personal needs and how best to help yourself.

This is where the polarised views emerge in the debate.

On the one hand [one hand out, keep it there], only the health professionals should decide! Learned people such as yourselves should of course decide!

On the other hand [other hand out, keep it there], the consumer or patient who seeks your help... Learned?? Perhaps, or perhaps not... but they do

know themselves better than you ever will, no matter how learned (or not) they are .

Either... or??

What I suggest [slowly bring both hands together].

The answer is ...both... and.

Rather than compromise, it is a fusion of two apparently opposing ideas to create something altogether new – something that may actually find a solution to our looming healthcare challenges.

That's not how I was taught, but I certainly hope that it is how you have been.

Today you should each be very proud of your achievement. Undertaking and successfully



completing a university degree is no small thing.

Your family and friends here with you today are, I am sure, equally proud.

But can I suggest that where you go from here is even more important.

You will enter a system where ownership of knowledge is paramount... and one person's ownership can be another person's loss.

In your first encounter with a real live patient or client, remember those two positions, your view and their view... and accept that somewhere between the two is probably the right one.

Sharing the knowledge you have gained here at the University of South Australia and sharing

decision-making can, I firmly believe, help solve the wicked problems that await you outside these halls.

And acceptance of a diversity of views will make you not only better professionals in your chosen careers...

... but also better citizens.

Again. Congratulations on your wonderful achievement.

Thank you.