

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA – GRADUATION

Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, parents and friends of graduands; but above all, to you, the graduating students.

It is my privilege to join in congratulating you.

Today, as every day, our mass media have devoted acres of space to stories about sporting success.

Much of this coverage is well deserved – but it is far more than the publicity given to our academic and research champions – the quiet achievers.

You should be in no doubt that your achievements are valued by society as much as sports stars are celebrated in the media. Your successes also come from years of hard work. And in academic work as in sport – indeed, as in every aspect of life - the crucial achievement to celebrate is not simply that you have won through, but that you have done as well as you personally could have done.

Your elite status as graduates from a university with a high reputation will of course make you attractive propositions for employers.

But can you contribute elsewhere? I want to speak briefly about ways in which you can use your new status to help others.

I might have said that I will speak about ways in which you can be proactive.....but a few years ago I had a conversation with a local government leader whose enthusiasm sometimes outweighed his command of language. He spoke with great vigour about the need to provide more leisure outlets for young people. I think he meant to say that they should have more scope to be pro-active – but what he actually said was, “Mike - We need to help our young people to be more procreative”.

I have been wary of the word “proactive” ever since.....

I am an unabashed public health campaigner and supporter of health charities, and believe that we can all do something to help and support others in ways that go beyond our day-to-day work tasks.

In the world I inhabit – that of public health – we have seen vast changes over the past two centuries – all because somebody, somewhere, decided that they could act to benefit the health of the community.

The basic public health legislation that we now take for granted, ensuring such staples as clean water, safe food and a healthy environment, only came into place because of campaigners. Believe it or not, they faced the kind of opposition we face now from tobacco or junk food interests. When the first sanitary legislation was proposed in England, an 1854 editorial in the London Times thundered, “we prefer to take our chances of cholera and the rest (rather) than be bullied into health”, continuing righteously, “every man is entitled to his own dungheap”.

Almost every measure we now know to benefit the health of the community has been opposed either by vested interests or for philosophical reasons – or just because it was dangerously new.

But they all eventually came into being because of three things:

Sound scientific evidence;

Committed campaigners;

And support from a range of health and community organisations.

Whatever the objective, we must recognise that everything we want will not come immediately – there wouldn’t be a need for a campaign otherwise.

One example. I have been involved in campaigning for action on tobacco for nearly forty years. For most of that time people would tell me that we were failing. Now, almost suddenly, the world has changed – at least in developed countries. Here in Australia we have the world’s best practice in tobacco control – a comprehensive program to reduce smoking in adults and children, curbs on the activities of tobacco companies – the world’s most lethal industry – and at long last a terrific program working with Aboriginal communities where smoking remains high. Once more than two thirds of Australian males were regular smokers: now around 15% of adults; and in this State less than 5% of 12 – 17 year olds are regular smokers. More than 70% of our school students have never even tried a cigarette – compared with 30% as recently as the 1980s.

So still work to be done; but a public health triumph of epic proportions, which has already prevented the premature deaths of hundreds of thousands of Australians. It didn’t happen instantly – I sometime put up a slide saying “overnight success takes time”; it came about despite ferocious opposition from tobacco interests (who still cynically oppose action they know will save lives) – but it is a success story to match any in our public health history.

And it all happened because a relatively small group of scientists developed the evidence, and an equally small group of campaigners worked together, and kept at it, supported by charities like the Cancer Council and Heart Foundation, and professional organisations like the AMA

So how is this relevant to you?

There is a role for all of us in looking beyond our day-to-day activities, and trying to identify how we can best benefit the broader community. It can require major behavioural change over time – such as smoking, or addressing some of the social determinants of health, or alcohol, or obesity. It can be a more modest local aspiration, such as providing opportunities for children to exercise, or promoting the interests of a patient group. But whatever the issue, I urge you as your career develops to find something where you believe that you, working with others, can make a difference to the health of the community.

There are all manner of different roles to be played. Some of you may be best placed using your research skills – but if you do this, and come up with important conclusions, don't just let them sit on the shelf, as too many scientists do. True translation of research comes when the results and conclusions are drawn to the attention of decision-makers and the community so that they can take action. There are few better role models here than Professor Kerin O'Dea of this university – an outstanding researcher who also makes things happen.

Some of you may be natural campaigners – people who can work with politicians and media to make a case. Equally important are those who work behind the scenes, developing strategies, organizing coalitions. And every organisation relies on those invaluable people who quietly work on raising funds to make the whole thing possible.

The important message is that there is a role for you to play – whether in a campaign or a charity – doing something beyond your day-to-day work. And if you do this, the crucial consideration is not whether it makes you feel good, but what benefits it will ultimately bring.

I recall that during my period as Chief Executive of a children's hospital we would feel enormous frustration around Easter time. All manner of chocolate producers would descend on the Hospital with vast quantities of Easter eggs – all the Easter eggs they had not been able to sell – which the patients were supposed to devour, ideally in front of the television cameras.

We would of course acknowledge their great generosity, while then wondering what on earth we could do with a huge stockpile of Easter eggs once we had

provided all the patients, staff and even our own families with enough chocolate to give the Easter Bunny a heart attack..... Generosity is about what is helpful to others, not just what makes us feel good or brings us commercial benefit.

The recent disasters in Queensland showed that our society can respond speedily and generously to the needs of others in times of crisis.

Our society responds wonderfully well to immediate tragedy and disaster. I experienced this at first hand at the time of the first Bali bombings, when I was Director General of Health in Western Australia. The willingness of staff at all levels to work through the clock - for several weeks - was matched only by the moving offers of help and support that came in from the community.

But we need that response beyond the floods and the bombings. We need people who are willing to devote time - often much more important than money - and expertise to consistently supporting the groups that exist to improve our health and well-being, to remedy disadvantage, or otherwise to support the community.

The futurist, Charles Handy, writes of the colossal changes that the world is undergoing, and points out how important even the smallest individual action can be. "Change" he says "comes from small initiatives which work, initiatives which initiated, become the fashion. We cannot wait for great visions from great people, for they are in short supply at the end of history. It is up to us to light our own small fires in the darkness".

Whether as campaigners, as supporters of charities - whatever the cause - if our society in future years is to see the same benefits we have had from clean water or a decline in smoking, we need health professionals with passion, commitment and the qualifications you now possess.

Whatever your career paths, I urge you to complement your work with roles in support of causes or charities which will enable you to further support and assist others. That way, the qualifications you have attained today will be worth even more than you might have imagined; you will gain even more satisfaction from your career than you might ever have thought possible; and along the way you can help to light some fires in the darkness.

Thank you - and congratulations again.

Mike Daube - 30 March 2011