

Distinguished guests, colleagues and graduates

It is an honour for me to speak to you on a day in which you celebrate one of life's great milestones.

All of you will have your own story of struggle in which you have overcome adversity in order to achieve your goals.

Whether it be disability, financial hardship or the simple ardour of study, all of you have overcome obstacles and risen to the task and have now received this university's endorsement for the future.

I wish you well as you begin your new future.

The diversity on show here today is a testament to the strength of the University of South Australia with graduates from numerous ages and backgrounds celebrating your achievements in many different fields and at different levels.

I want to particularly congratulate those of who from overseas who have completed your studies. Your contribution to our city is most welcome and I trust that you will look fondly upon your years in Adelaide and your experience in South Australia.

The theme of my address is opportunities and responsibilities.

As health care professionals, you will enter a world of boundless opportunities.

You will never be short of work. Demand for health care services increases at a rapid rate until 2040.

It is only in 2040 that the demand for health care services from an ageing population flattens and eventually decreases.

So for the next 34 years your skills will be increasingly demanded by a voracious need for health care services.

If you maintain your skills and behave yourself you will never be unemployed and you will essentially be in a position to choose your hours of work as well as your place of work.

You will also enjoy the opportunity of specialising in a field of interest.

Perhaps the greatest opportunity lies with those who seek to make a major contribution to Australia by working with aboriginal communities and rural South Australian communities.

Those who pursue these particular opportunities will accrue the greatest benefit that the health care professions have to offer – the benefit of making a difference.

Australia's greatest health professionals are those that seek to use their skills to meet the greatest challenges. Our heroes are those that change more than the client in front of them but also the world around them.

If you work with aboriginal Australians you will make a difference. The contribution of your skills and your dedication will provide the basis for the resolution of Australia's greatest challenge – the delivery of social justice for the first Australians.

If you work with aboriginal Australians you will write the history of reconciliation and be satisfied that it was you who was there when you were needed.

Similarly, those who work in rural Australia (preferably rural South Australia) will enjoy a better experience than those who choose not to.

Rural health professionals enjoy a measure of respect and goodwill that their commodified urban colleagues can only envy.

Rural practice confers community leadership upon those who contribute. Put simply, the rural health professional is somebody in their community – a respected leader who is often consulted at times of community need and a rallying point when a community needs support.

Rural practice is diverse. Rural health care professionals make a difference to a much greater extent than their urban colleagues. To the rural health professional work is a rewarding lifestyle – not a day at the office.

Those of you who pursue opportunities outside of aboriginal and rural communities will no doubt prosper but those of who take up these challenges will not only prosper materially but will also gain the satisfaction of knowing that you have made a difference.

But with opportunities comes responsibilities.

I don't wish to sound like an ageing and nostalgic schoolmaster but it is important to note that society's expectations of health care professionals have become clearer in recent years.

Clarity has been brought to this debate by the rise of the health care consumer movement and some unfortunate transgressions by our colleagues.

The health care consumer is no longer a passive observer in the care process. Consumers are too well informed now to be passive and too educated to be intimidated.

Your patients will be more assertive than mine were. They will ask more questions and they will know exactly what they want.

Furthermore, recent failures by health care professionals to behave appropriately or to maintain their competence have fuelled the resolve of the consumer to be more assertive than they ever have been before.

The responsibilities that have become clearer from these expectations will be yours for as long as you practice your profession in whatever setting you choose to practice. They are personal responsibilities – they are not altered by employment, place of practice or seniority.

It will be your responsibility to be competent and accurate in your practice. There is an expectation that you will educate yourself to maintain your skills and know your limits. If the clinical situation moves beyond your level of competence, you will be expected to seek assistance.

It will be your responsibility to actively communicate with other professionals and health care providers. Indifference to the fundamental skill of communication lies at the heart of most calamities in health care.

Your communication with patients will be expected to be honest, accurate and respectful.

Nobody is perfect so we all fall short of the mark from time to time but those who don't learn from their errors have no place in our professions.

Added to these responsibilities to our patients are the broader responsibilities that each professional has to our own profession.

The responsibility to teach the next generation is a key contribution that we must all make.

The transmission of knowledge and skill is one of the treasures of professional practice. To watch others acquire the skills with which you practice is a unique experience. To master the educative process itself is the preserve of true leaders.

The responsibility to contribute to the governance of the profession is a collective responsibility of the profession as a whole if not necessarily all individuals within it.

Only the leaders of a profession can truly have the wisdom to set the standards of its practice. Hence the vital importance of self governance through professional boards such as the Nurses Board, Physiotherapy Board etc.

In fact, currently the professions are being called upon to justify their self governing tradition.

Self governance is under pressure as it is becoming increasingly associated with rigidity of professional role demarcation and questions over the veracity of the maintenance of professional standards.

If the professions do not continually demonstrate the safety and benefits of self governance then someone else will govern for them.

The professions are on notice that autonomy must be accompanied by accountability.

So wherein lies the opportunity for the new graduate is this confusing and daunting array of responsibilities?

Nearly all of you will acquire such skill that your responsibilities will come naturally to you and you will happily live the model professional life to which you have aspired.

But some of you will develop a deeper understanding – and therein lies great opportunity.

Some of you will see your role within a wider context. The place of the profession itself will develop clearly in your own vision of the future.

Some of you (I hope many of you) will develop leadership skills that will take you above the noise of day to day practice and into the clear skies of what lays beyond.

True leadership skills are incredibly scarce but yet so vitally important.

Those of you who develop a vision for the future with the fortitude to back it up with clear, well considered decisions will make an invaluable contribution to your profession and those for whom we care.

You will be the gems of this graduation and I urge you to seize your opportunities and take hold of the issues and lead us into the future

Thank you