

## OCCASIONAL ADDRESS

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Delivered at the graduation ceremony for graduates from  
the Faculty of Education; and the Faculty of Nursing, Midwifery and Health

Greenhalgh Theatre, Kuring-gai Campus, Thursday 31 March 2005, 2.30pm

Congratulations to all who have received their testamur today. It has, no doubt, been a hard but enjoyable slog.

I would particularly like to congratulate the support networks that have sustained you – your parents, partners, family and friends. Their contributions to your success being celebrated here today have been profound – they have every right to be proud.

- And students, in today's climate where many of you have had to combine paid work and study, congratulations on your achievements – balancing the pressures and obligations isn't easy, and finding time for everything can be a battle of priorities.

- To those of you who are politely named "non-recent school leavers" or "mature-aged students", we know how difficult it can be when there never seems enough time to be a student, probably in paid employment AND a parent/partner/carer – and cook, and bottle washer! – We salute your success.

- And to those students for whom English is not your first language, both local and international students, congratulations on mastering not only your course work but doing so in a language and a culture that is a challenge in itself!

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When I was asked to give this address I was of course greatly honored and I felt quite comfortable about saying a few words about education, about teachers and teaching. I have as you have heard been in that game for some time. But what could I say to a group of Health professionals whose knowledge in this area far surpasses anything I could say. However the more I thought about it the similarities were greater than the differences.

Both professions are really a measure of the quality of a country. What better way to measure a country than through the quality of its education systems and its health provision? In Australia it is particularly true. We hold ourselves up to have that wonderful value we call "a fair go" for all. It is through the classroom that every child

is given that fair go and it is in the care of our sick that a fair go for all has a particularly sharp meaning.

It is very fitting that this should be a combined graduation ceremony – of teachers and nurses. Both professions are crucial to the well-being of our people – you are **on the frontline** – in a unique position to provide service to your fellow countrymen and women.

May I speak to the graduating teachers first – as an administrator and as a teacher I would like to welcome you to the teaching community!

Today some of you have received your first degree, and for others it is a postgraduate qualification. You are all critical to this nation's future – which is a fairly serious thing to say – but may I also add that I hope you find friendship, fun and great personal satisfaction in your career. I know there will be frustrations – but there will be great rewards and it will never be boring!

And though I haven't been a nurse, a midwife or health educator, may I presume as a "sometime patient", to reiterate the absolutely crucial role that Nursing graduates play in all our lives, and the contribution you make to our community. All of us here today would agree that when we (or our loved ones) need a nurse, we want that nurse to be as skilful and as caring as humanly possible! And that also means the health managers and educators among you here; we need to trust the team! Congratulations on reaching the next stage of your career! And I hope you also find friendship and fun along the way!

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Each profession clearly bears great responsibilities - those in the Nursing profession work with the sick and injured in hospital at critical moments in their lives, or work in the community in health centers, or help to bring new life into the world – using not only skills and experience, but compassion and understanding. Today's nurses care for the whole person, and that means widening their commitment to the family and to an awareness of the cultural context of those in their care. I can think of no other profession where the capacity to have empathy, to understand the other person, their fears and hopes is so important.

I know from personal experience how a group of nurses, their sense of fun but gentleness helped me during a very serious injury as a young man. It was the attitude and personalities of the nurses that made such a difference to me. I considered myself very fortunate.

Those in the Teaching profession educate the young, another great responsibility – not only teaching the next generations the literacy and numeracy skills to function in a high tech world, and to know something of its history and geography, its science and its literature, its art and its music, but to be curious and confident people, with values of tolerance and respect for others. How many people here can say they have

gotten to University because a teacher or teachers have taken some special interest in them? Many I should think.

I know I can still think of those couple of teachers who for some reason took a special interest in me. They made me feel good about myself and gave me confidence to take risks and think beyond the square. It was the empathy and encouragement they gave. Much like the experiences I have had from the health professionals.

So these are big jobs... And neither profession will make you rich – but that's not why you chose Nursing, Midwifery and Health, or Education.

And while you're not getting rich, you will also find that being on the frontline may mean sometimes copping criticism particularly from some of the public and unfortunately the media. It often seems that only a crisis gets public attention – not the positives of your contributions which usually go unnoticed.

Yet it is important to remind ourselves that your contributions to the young, on the one hand, and to the unwell on the other, are essentially private matters which won't get reported very often. It is the day-to-day achievements that count, the small acknowledgements from those in your care that can't be counted in dollar terms.

These are the immeasurable rewards for serving on that frontline - knowing that you have made a difference. You may well be saying who is he kidding, I am no martyr. Well let me say the pay is not too bad but it is true the buzz (job satisfaction by another name) will in fact come from doing your primary task. That is by helping someone, by giving people a fair go.

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In the challenging environment of high technology and great leaps in scientific knowledge, and as our society changes irrevocably under the weight of global and national circumstances beyond our control, we all acknowledge that there is an increased pressure on your professions, there at the front line. This is intensified as some of the new knowledge or experiences take us all into areas of ethical complexity.

Our teachers for example, have many expectations placed on them that just did not exist for those of us from another generation. We live in a prosperous society, yet the gap between rich and poor is widening. We live in a multi-cultural society, yet the media persists in focusing on events which divide us. We live in an energetic and confident society, yet we lose too many of our young people to drugs or car accidents. And the school curriculum ever expands with the expectation that teachers address such issues. Some parents just don't have the time for their kids that they should. Value systems in some homes are really dubious. Schools and teachers sometimes have to fill in that vacuum. It can be a very challenging task

I believe that tolerance, reward for achievement, dealing with competition and most importantly, promoting a fair go for all can be the values that emerge when teachers

are insightful and committed to encouraging children's self-belief. Teachers are mentors and role models, whether they wish it or not, and they are able to reinforce positive values if they have children's respect. Which is a two way process. Respect is earned, it can't be demanded. I believe that the values outcomes from a school system are as powerful and as important as the more widely measured cognitive ones.

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The Nursing, Midwifery and Health profession is incredibly diverse. Here today there is a representation of this diversity: clinical practitioners, midwives, nursing managers and nursing educators, and specialists in contexts as varied as community health centres, operating theatres and critical care units in hospitals. You take up positions of responsibility not only to patients, but to the systems that employ you – and may I add, to the community as a whole, and to your profession.

For as any thinking person knows, Nursing is more than having certain skills, as vital as these competencies are to us all! It is also about making decisions in the light of a wider context of competing theories and explanations, weighing alternatives, assessing possible outcomes, often at a highly-charged emotional time in people's lives or in a difficult political climate. And of course, in the context of budgetary constraints!

Your knowledge does not remain academic however, and certainly not from this point on - it is nurses and health professionals who translate theoretical knowledge into practice, because they see human costs, such as from the sub-standard state of indigenous health, drug and alcohol abuse, injuries from traffic accidents, increasing obesity, the inadequate staffing of country hospitals and facilities ... the list goes on. We need to listen to our nurses if we want change, improvement of treatments and resources, and prevention of illness or injury. The challenge for you is to be heard and as some of you move into administration your job is to listen.

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So, it is clear that our nurses and our teachers play a most valuable and intrinsic role in our society, to meet the challenges facing our country today. Both professions attract those who already care enough about others to want to make a contribution to the social capital of our nation. Now we hope your studies here have widened your vision of what it means to be a teacher or a nurse, as well as having developed the skills. We hope your study has enriched your knowledge and deepened your understanding of the needs and rights of others in our society, and of the implications of policy on practice.

Tolerance and integrity, commitment and hard work – with these values you all have the potential to contribute to the greater good – you have a unique capacity to provide service to your fellow Australians and mould a better future for this country. Sounds overwhelming? A bit trite? *“Hey, he’s talking about someone else, that’s not me!”?*

**Well, it is you** – And I mean that very sincerely.

When I talk to new teachers I sometimes describe the characteristics they need to make a go of it. In looking at these I suspect they are equally true of the characteristics of the health profession:

- 1) Understanding by you of your importance to a Child's (Patient's) future
- 2) A sense of fun and engagement with children. (With patients)
- 3) Resilience
- 4) Commitment to a team - within the school or hospital
- 5) Commitment to continued study and development (NB higher degrees students here today)
- 6) Commitment to a value system
- 7) Sense of your own worth to the greater good

I congratulate you again, and I particularly congratulate your university, the academic and administrative staff. Graduate Nurses and Teachers from UTS have an enviable and well-deserved reputation in our community and I thank your lecturers on your behalf.

I wish you well for the future.