

## Putting your best foot forward and overcoming challenges

Address to Victorian College of Pharmacy students

18 February 2008

The Victorian College of Pharmacy has asked me to speak to you today about – and it says so on your O-Week online agenda – ‘putting your best foot forward and overcoming challenges.’

I can’t believe I’m speaking in one of the oldest pharmacy schools in Australia, because I could not get into health sciences or medicine – I was no good at maths at school! Being an Asian kid and not being good at maths is like having borderline intellectual capacity. Other kids don’t believe you when you tell them you can’t help them – that you need help yourself!

So it’s a great honour to be here today, among those of you who have accomplished more than I ever did – that is, post-Year-10 maths! I’m a writer and lawyer. Not being an inspirational pharmacist, what can I say about putting your best foot forward and overcoming challenges? Well, I’ll say two things:

Firstly, if you’re going to put your best foot forward, make sure you wear good shoes. You don’t want to wear your four-dollar Kmart thongs around in the lab – it’s an occupational health and safety hazard.

Secondly, I have no idea what challenges you’re going to be up against as pharmacy students. The last time I mixed up some chemicals was when I tried to be cheap and bought a Garnier hair-colouring kit for \$8.99 at Thao Nguyen Pharmacy in Footscray.

So what advice can I give you today?

As a lawyer, I hope I won’t have to give you any advice, because often when I give advice to professionals it means they’ve been accused of doing something shifty.

But as a storyteller, I can tell you some stories. First of all, a legend about the origin of your profession, which is, coincidentally, about a man who did not put his best foot forward:

This story is told by Plutarch, an Italian historian, about the building of the Parthenon, the ancient Greek temple of the gods. It took many people to build this massive, glorious temple, and it seemed as if the construction was blessed by the gods. But one day, the quickest and most skilled workman was doing some work high up on the pillars of the temple, perhaps carving one of the metopes, when he put his wrong foot forward and fell from a high beam. He lay at the bottom of the temple in a miserable condition. Remember, this is an era before OH&S and personal litigation lawyers.

So all the doctors came and had a look at him. They took one look and thought he was on his way off this mortal coil. What Plutarch says is, ‘The physicians had no hope of his recovery.’ Pericles, the great statesman, was in distress about this. But that night, the goddess Athena Hygeia appeared to him in a dream, and told him a course of treatment. So he mixed up some medicines, and miraculously, the workman was cured. Pericles then set up a gold statue of Athena Hygeia, in the altar of the temple, when the building was complete.

So, the first pharmacist was a woman and she was a goddess. She did what no doctor could do, and healed someone in a lot of pain. It appears you are in a profession descended from the gods!

The bowl of Hygeia is your symbol. You know how Superman has his S and Batman has his web – well, you have a bowl with a snake wrapped around it.

The bowl is to symbolise the healing powers of Hygiea. The snake is probably to remind you not to mix up dodgy substances in a back shed because they could be lethal!

On your website, there are five reasons listed for studying pharmacy:

1. The huge employment rate and great starting salaries
2. The prestige
3. It's cutting-edge
4. The global connections
5. Location, location, location

The last one sounds like a real-estate ad! These were the same reasons the Melbourne law school gave us for studying law, and probably the very same reasons applicable to the study of every profession.

But why did I study law? Because I got the marks. You have to be honest with yourself. Very rarely do people get the burning desire to do a profession, and when they do it is a wonderful thing.

For most of us, we have a vague idea of what society considers respectable, what will give us a comfortable life, what will make our parents happy, or if we're mature aged and have families what will feed our kids (please don't feed pharmaceuticals to your kids, but you know what I mean).

Pharmacy, like law, is a profession. Unlike your companions studying science, you're in training to be a pharmacist. So what does this all mean? What does it mean to study a profession?

To be honest, it didn't mean that much to me in my early days of studying law.

I was just rapt people thought I was smart! Two weeks ago I was just a sales-girl at my dad's store in Footscray who needed a calculator whenever a customer bought more than two items. I wasn't even sure whether I'd make it to university, and now people were seeing me as a future lawyer.

You might also come across people who give you heightened respect as a pharmacy student, and it might be bewildering – only two weeks ago you were loitering around in your singlet at home, and now people are seeing you in a lab making lots of money.

The actual studying of a profession also did not mean much when I started law school, because nothing meant much in those early days when I sat through the classes. That was because I couldn't understand sentences such as: 'The post-modern, post-structuralist agendas of Western legal theory speak volumes about existential despair. Discuss in relation to Derrida.'

I sat there in class, thinking, *What the ...?*

Then I went back to Footscray that weekend and was working in my dad's shop thinking about friggin Derrida and his post-structuralist agendas, worried about how I'd understand all this. The only post-structuralism I'd come across that day was when I sticky-taped all the cardboard television boxes into shape in the warehouse.

My dad came in and handed me a letter from the local council, threatening to sue him for his roller-shutters. I thought, well, I've been given all these research tools and books and a guided library tour of the law school, so I can probably help out with this. When my dad found out I could do that, he started handing me all sorts of stuff to

work out: employment contracts, submissions to the government to buy land, letters to real-estate agents. Then all my relatives got onto the bandwagon, and started handing me more problems to solve – letters to dodgy builders, unjustified fines – all sorts of issues.

I thought, excellent. So this is what it's about. These people don't know English. They don't hire lawyers to deal with such issues. Unlike being in high school, where 98 per cent was not good enough and you had parents asking where the other 2 per cent went, now anything you did in your profession for your family was good enough. They trusted you because you had the skills and they didn't.

So by the end of my degree I looked at the 'reasons' again.

### **Prestige**

I realised there were two different types of respect – the supplicators who respect you because of your title, or those who respect you because you render a service. The latter is always the more satisfying form.

### **Money**

Really, if you want to make big bucks, go into business! In a profession, you cannot do things solely for the prestige or for the money.

You are rendering a great service to your community. You must not forget that this is first and foremost. You might think, yeah, they're lofty ideals, but I'll be in the back of some nice white pharmacy somewhere mixing stuff, but you are not a \$4 St Albans drug dealer! You can make people well, or you can make them very sick.

You may also think, yeah, I'll think about these things when I graduate and start work. But it starts very early in your course. Companies will give you a lot of free things. Don't get used to it. *Never* get used to it. Ask why you're getting these free things. Investigate things for yourself.

Your teachers, your course advisers, the whole Monash contingency – will give you sound, good and practical advice about your journey ahead. As I said, I'm just here to tell you stories. But it's important to know these stories – about the origin of your profession, the legends, the history of genuine respect, the fact that you come from a profession with a lot of integrity.

It is important not only to know what you're studying, but to know *why* you're studying one of the oldest professions in the world (As a 'solicitor,' I am in the other one!). Knowing this may help ensure that you do not get lost along the way. If you do get lost, it's okay. You'll find your way back, or you'll find your way to somewhere else.

I wish you all the best of luck.