

University of South Australia Graduation Address

Thank you for this great honour. My parents were both born in SA and met at Unley High School, so whilst I have never lived in Adelaide, it is part of my heritage.

I would also like to acknowledge that I am giving this talk today on Kerna Land. In acknowledging that we need to understand the impact that we have had on the First Nations peoples in Australia. This has been a significant part of our research. I would like you as students, families and staff to read the Uluru Statement from the Heart which is a beautifully phrased request by First Nations for a voice, treaty negotiations and for us to acknowledge our combined histories. We have shown that if First Nations have control and input in to what happens to them, all their outcomes improve. I would like to quote G Yunipingu:

Galarrwuy Yunupingu

“What Aboriginal people ask is that the modern world now makes the sacrifices necessary to give us a real future. To relax its grip on us. To let us breathe, to let us be free of the determined control exerted on us to make us like you. And you should take that a step further and recognise us for who we are, and not who you want us to be. Let us be who we are – Aboriginal people in a modern world – and be proud of us. Acknowledge that we have survived the worst that the past had thrown at us, and we are here with our songs, our ceremonies, our land, our language and our people – our full identity. What a gift this is that we can give you, if you choose to accept us in a meaningful way.”

In simplistic terms, over the last 50 years, there have been devastating effects on the planet from the policies and practices driven by creating wealth without any consideration of how that wealth is created and used by countries. Using GDP as a singular measure of a successful society has driven many developed and increasingly, developing countries to pursue a damaging neo-liberal conservative agenda. Such agendas push unfettered growth and increased consumption, encourage corporate and individual wealth creation, with the promise that everyone will benefit from these activities. The combination of increased population numbers with increasing consumption (of many products which are not necessary for health or happiness) has resulted in a range of outcomes which are now detrimental not only to human survival, but of many other species whose existence not only contributes to our appreciation and wonder of nature but are also essential for our survival. These outcomes include climate change, environmental degradation, huge waste creation, and loss of essential biodiversity, military activity with resulting refugees, growing inequalities in wealth, power, opportunity, health, education, employment and housing within and between countries. They also feed into rising rates of anxiety and depression/mental health problems, costs of services, lack of community trust and feelings of powerlessness, replacing altruism and caring communities.

Of course, I am focussed on the health and wellbeing of children and young people, not just those already born but those who are not yet born but who will bear the brunt of what these current and historical policies have created.

I am concerned that the most powerful and influential voices in decision making are those who stand to gain from the short-term wealth, that many of these global corporations and wealthy individuals are above any government, that science is being denigrated and ignored, not just in relation to climate change but in many other areas as well, including in Aboriginal child health and development (eg the prevention of inter-generational trauma and the resulting developmental problems).

Hence I am lobbying to focus on policies and practices that encourage sustainability, are not polluting, are equitable and use the best evidence based on science. Of course I want also to stop Adani and the mining of fossil fuels; the data are now showing that renewables are not only best for the planet but are also cost effective.

And another reason for supporting a First Nations voice in Canberra is that all the issues I have mentioned here could be influenced by the wisdom and knowledge of these traditional owners: how to manage the land, our relationship to it and how we relate to each other.

What does this mean for all of you graduating today? In giving you and your families my warmest congratulations for your success after years of study and work, I urge you to think about these remarks that I have made about our world. You are scientists and health professionals in a range of caring professions. You have a duty of care by using the best evidence for your work and to always question how you could do it better. If you do not know the answers, seek them out by doing research and be curious.

I would like to end by asking that you bring compassion and a caring approach to your work as health professionals.

To illustrate this, I leave you with a quote from a Kerna woman poet, who won the top poetry prize in the world but because she is Aboriginal and a woman, not too many value her here in Australia. Her name is Ali Cobby Eckerman and she deserves our accolades. Maybe you should consider awarding her an Honorary Doctorate as well. Here is her poem:

I Tell You True

I can't stop drinking I tell you true
Since I watched my daughter perish
She burnt to death inside a car
I lost what I most cherished
I seen the angels hold her
As I screamed with useless hope
I can't stop drinking I tell you true
It's the only way I cope

I can't stop drinking I tell you true
Since I found my sister dead
She hung herself to stop the rapes
I found her in the shed
That rapist bastard still lives here
Unpunished in this town
I can't stop drinking I tell you true
Since I cut her down

I can't stop drinking I tell you true
Since my mother passed away
They found her battered down the creek
I miss her more each day
My family blamed me for her death
Their words have made me wild
I can't stop drinking I tell you true
'Cos I was just a child

So if you see someone like me
Who's drunk and loud and cursing
Don't judge too hard 'cos you don't know
What sorrows we are nursing.

Thank you for your attention and all the best for your futures.