

Occasional Address
Royal Exhibition Building, 6 December 2018, 11.00am

Professor John McHutchison AO MD

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Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, distinguished guests and the excited 2018 graduates, thank you for the warm welcome and the opportunity to be here with you today. I cannot overstate my esteem for this great institution. The opportunities and experiences that it provided early on in my scientific life have molded my paths and decisions throughout my career.

It is a unique privilege to return to one's alma mater – a time to reminisce about my days in this community, to reflect on the journey since and to be inspired by you, our graduates.

Let me start by saying to today's graduates, congratulations.

It is an honor to join you as you put a capstone on one successful chapter and embark on the next. You have spent your time at university seeking to understand the world around you through the lens of science. A lens that magnifies the reality of both the surprisingly complex and the frustratingly simple. As you look beyond your days here and take your learnings with you, you will find yourself turning to science not only to better understand the world, but to find remarkable and impactful ways to improve it.

I cannot wait to see what this class will accomplish next.

With that in mind, I wanted to share three tenets of success that I first learned here as a student and that have helped shape many aspects of my life since. First, as a resident in Melbourne, then as a physician and researcher in the United States, today, as a scientist and leader at a biotechnology company and most importantly, as a husband and father of five.

I encourage you, no matter the path you pursue or where it leads, to keep these tenets close.

First, always strive for the truth and follow your gut instinct. As scientists, we are taught to search for the truth through data and observation. Remember this approach for all aspects of life. Follow the data, follow the science and don't be distracted by the peripherals—politics, personalities or perceived financial gains.

Always ask why. During my time here, my professors and advisors encouraged me to never stop questioning. Make the word "why" a cornerstone of your practice, especially when it is hard to do so or the problem seems too "big". Embrace your innate curiosity. As a society, our greatest work and leaps in knowledge have always been born out of first, asking why.

When I was at Duke University, we asked, “why do African Americans with hepatitis C respond less well to interferon?” So, we embarked on a large, genetic study that discovered the underpinning for this observation—the IL28b gene SNP. This finding helped to transform the field, our understanding of hepatitis C, and remains one of the most important pharmacogenetic discoveries ever made.

Third, collaborate. And be the best collaborator that you can. Great science is discovered when individuals come together as a team with a common goal, shared vision and complimentary talents. Breakthroughs do not happen in silos, and history has proven this time and time again. During my career, I have been privileged to work on the development of innovative, new medicines. Every one of those medicines resulted from years of hard work and collaboration bridging disciplines, and drawing on the collective wisdom of an entire community. Find your trusted collaborators, share ideas and work together. You will find that your efforts produce extraordinary outcomes.

Please take these three simple tenets with you and above all, consider your chosen role in science as a privilege, an honor and a life’s passion. I have always considered that I have a “hobby” and not a job.

And in closing, allow today to truly sink in. Take note of your accomplishments so far, and recognize your hard work. And thank your family, friends and our learned faculty who have supported you along the way.

I wish you all the best.

Congratulations and thank you.

Citation for Doctor of Medical Science (honoris causa)

Discovering a genuine cure for any disease is a rare and precious event. Discovering and developing an effective cure for a disease that affects millions of people differently, according to their genetic background, is truly extraordinary.

Chronic Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) is a major global public health concern, estimated by the World Health Organization to affect 71 million people worldwide, often causing cirrhosis and carcinoma of the liver. The standard of care, however, for this serious, progressive and often life-threatening disease is changing rapidly, due in large part to Professor John McHutchison's 30 years dedicated to explaining the genetic basis of differing patient responses to HCV infection, and developing a series of curative treatments that apply to allcomers.

After graduating MBBS from the University of Melbourne in 1981 John McHutchison completed his basic training in internal medicine, then a fellowship in gastroenterology, at the Royal Melbourne Hospital where his interest in liver disease, and his work with hepatitis patients began.

Following a move to the USA, working at the University of Southern California and subsequently Scripps Clinic, John McHutchison published a seminal research paper in the New England Journal of Medicine that demonstrated the value of combining interferon-alpha treatment with ribavirin, the result of a large clinical trial in patients with HCV infection. This became the standard of care for the next 15 years: a significant improvement on the previous treatment which had little effect for most patients. In follow-up studies he demonstrated the significance of racial background in determining therapeutic response and proposed the tailoring of personalised medicine based on HCV genotype. Then, while at Duke University, he used a genome wide association approach to identify and explain the critical role played by different host genetic variations in patient responses to HCV infection and treatment regimens.

The extraordinary significance of this work was acknowledged by John McHutchison's election to the prestigious Association of American Physicians and he was subsequently appointed, as Senior Vice-President, Liver Disease Therapeutics, at Gilead Sciences, in 2010. More recently, he has been appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia. At Gilead, he has been responsible for developing four antiviral drug combinations, Sovaldi®, Harvoni® and the more broad-spectrum Eplclusa®, and Vosevi® regimens. These small molecule drug combinations can with a simple once daily short course of treatment of 8-12 weeks duration collectively cure nearly every patient infected with HCV, Thanks to this work, HCV now represents the first chronic viral infection to be totally curable, irrespective of ethnicity, viral genotype, or the severity of the underlying liver disease.

John McHutchison's work has direct implications for the health and well-being of the broader community. The dedicated contributions of his team, collaborating with academic and government institutions and non-government organisations, have enabled national health systems of underdeveloped countries to adopt ambitious initiatives to eliminate HCV making the promise of global control of HCV a potential reality within the next decade. In Australia, his team is collaborating with several academic centres to curb the spread of HCV infection in prisons and among intravenous drug users.

Professor John McHutchison is recommended for the award of Doctor of Medical Science (honoris causa) for his innovative and ground-breaking work aimed at eradicating Hepatitis C Virus and eliminating the suffering it causes to millions across the world. His novel and highly sophisticated approach has elucidated for medical practitioners which patients do or do not need treatment; which treatment combinations are most effective for which patients; and he has led the development of the combination therapies that are now achieving astounding rates of cure.