

Occasional Address

Royal Exhibition Building Wednesday 13 December 2017, 11.00am

Laureate Professor Hugh Taylor

Harold Mitchell Professor of Indigenous Eye Health, University of Melbourne.

I would like to recognise the Elders of the Wurundjeri, past and present, the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land on which we meet.

Chancellor, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen and particularly to you, the new alumni of the University of Melbourne,

Congratulations:

Congratulations on reaching this wonderful day that marks so much hard work and effort. Congratulations for being alumni of one of the world's great universities. Congratulations on completing a major step on your chosen career.

Congratulations too, to the parents, partners and spouses, families and friends, who have supported and encouraged you through your long and arduous studies. They truly deserve to share the joy of this day with you. But this is your day, and you should enjoy it.

I would like to tell you a little about how my career evolved. I grew up in Melbourne and trained at this great University. Medicine was a 6-year course, but at the end of 4th year the opportunity came to do some basic research, it was too good an opportunity to pass up. There I learnt how rewarding it was to find new information because you really wanted to explore a question and discover the answer.

After residency, I became an ophthalmology registrar at the Eye and Ear Hospital. By chance, I asked Fred Hollows if I could join him, on a weekend-long eye-care visit to Bourke. I did not know he was about to start an ambitious program, that examined Aboriginal people right across Australia, or that I would spend the next year as his assistant director. This opened my eyes, excuse the pun, to the huge disparity faced by Aboriginal Australians. It introduced me to the power of public health and revealed a very different level of care to that we were used to in Melbourne.

Then I went to Johns Hopkins University in the US for a one year fellowship. I became immersed in a number of research projects, joined the faculty and stayed for nearly 14 years.

I returned to Melbourne in 1990 as Professor of Ophthalmology, based at the Eye and Ear Hospital, and set up the Centre for Eye Research Australia. In 2008, I moved to the Melbourne School of Population and Global Health to work on Aboriginal eye health, and how to Close the Gap for Vision.

You may ask, why am I telling you all this? I want to share with you four quotes that have helped guide me through my career, that has included clinical work, public health, teaching and research that has been challenging and rewarding. I hope the quotations may be as helpful for you.

The first comes from Louis Pasteur, whose discovery of bacteria laid the basis for so much of modern medicine. He said “Chance favours the prepared mind”. So often new insight comes from unexpected quarters or chance conversations, that open up new pathways, but you have to be ready for these unexpected opportunities. One example for me was a conversation at Johns Hopkins, that led to 10 years of work in Africa and the development of a new drug, to stop people going blind from River Blindness. Now each year, 120 million people receive this drug free.

My second quote comes from Sir Peter Medawar, who shared the 1960 Nobel Prize for medicine with Melbourne’s MacFarlane Burnett. Medawar said “Dull and piffling problems, yield dull and piffling answers. A problem must be such, that it matters what the answer is to science generally, or to mankind.” There are so many things to work on, that one must assess whether a project is really important, and whether your time is going to be well spent.

But if you are doing something worthwhile, it will almost certainly be bigger than you can handle on your own. The third quote comes from Robert Woodruff, at the age of 23 he joined his father’s small, soft drink company in Atlanta, Georgia. When he retired 61 years later, having been Chairman for decades, Coca Cola was known around the world. He said, “There is no limit to what a man can do (and I am sure he meant a man or a woman), if he does not care who takes the credit”. Working with a team greatly enhances what can be done, but you must make sure that your collaborators and partners are having as much fun as you are, and that they share the recognition. If the job gets done, or the problem solved, it does not matter if your own personal brilliance is not up there in lights. By building consensus and bringing people together, one can change the world.

Finally, a quote from Helen Keller, who grew up blind and deaf in the Deep South after end of the American Civil War. She said “I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something, and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something I can do”. There are many huge problems and issues that need to be addressed for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people. One person cannot solve all these issues, but I do know about eye disease and we can, and we are, making a difference there.

So, I encourage you all to be empowered, seize the opportunity, have a go, start the ball to rolling, and encourage others to join you and help.

To repeat the four quotes:

- “Chance favours the prepared mind”.
- “Dull and piffling problems yield dull and piffling answers. A problem must be such that it matters what the answer is to science generally or to mankind.”
- “There is no limit to what a man can do if he does not care who takes the credit”.
- “I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something, and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do, the something I can do”.
-

I repeat my congratulations to each and every one of you, on your fine achievements and on your graduation today. I wish you every success in your chosen career and I hope that the wise words I have quoted can be as much help to you as they have been to me. Best wishes, and thank you.

Vice-Chancellor's Introduction

Today we are delighted to welcome as guest speaker Melbourne Laureate Professor Hugh Taylor, currently the Harold Mitchell Professor of Indigenous Eye Health at the University of Melbourne.

Professor Taylor was Head of the Department of Ophthalmology at the University of Melbourne and the Founding Director of the Centre for Eye Research Australia from 1990 to 2007. Prior to that, he was a Professor of Ophthalmology at the Wilmer Institute at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore with joint appointments in the Departments of Epidemiology and International Health.

Professor Taylor's current work focuses on Aboriginal eye health. He has led the efforts to eliminate trachoma in Australia and developed "The Roadmap to Close the Gap for Vision", a blueprint to provide sustainable eye---care services to Indigenous Australians. He has worked with WHO in different roles for over 30 years.

He has written 36 books and reports and more than 700 scientific papers, and has received multiple international awards and prizes. He is also a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Health and Medical Sciences, and in 2001 was made a Companion in the Order of Australia.

He is the President of the International Council of Ophthalmology, Deputy Chairman of Vision 2020 Australia and was Vice President of the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness.

It is a pleasure to call on him to speak today. Please welcome Professor Hugh Taylor.