

Occasional Address

Royal Exhibition Building, Saturday 14 December 2019, 2.30pm

Dr Matthew Hopcraft

CEO, Australian Dental Association (Victorian Branch)

Thank-you Chancellor, academic colleagues, distinguished guests, family, friends and most importantly, our graduands.

It is an absolute honour to be invited to give the occasional address for the 2019 graduating dentistry, oral health therapy and higher degree classes today.

It might surprise you know that 25 years ago this week, I was sitting up in Wilson Hall, nervous and excited, about to receive my Bachelor of Dental Science degree.

It's fair to say that I don't think too many people – my lecturers, the Dean or even my friends in dental school – would have thought that I would be the one most likely to give an occasional address at a graduation ceremony at any time in the future.

But that's what I love about our profession. It provides so many opportunities to do amazing things.

So much has changed in the dental profession since I graduated. There are challenges facing you today that I could not have conceived of 25 years ago.

We learned virtually nothing about implants – they were just an emerging new technology.

Digital dentistry didn't exist – no scanning impressions or chairside milling of crowns. We took impressions the old-fashioned messy way, and learnt the lost wax technique for making gold crowns.

No-one wore loupes.

I remember Professor Tyas introducing us to an amazing new dental material – glass ionomer cement.

But like everything, there are some constants.

As they say, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Fundamentally, our job is still about improving the oral health of the whole community, and in that we still have so much work to do.

As a young kid growing up in country Victoria, I decided I wanted to be a dentist, because it seemed like a good way to help people – and my own local dentist convinced me that it was a good profession to enter. After doing work experience with him, I was hooked.

My plan, if you could call it that, was to graduate and move back to the country and eventually open a small practice. Obviously, planning is not my strong suit, because that never happened.

We are always presented with opportunities in life, and sometimes the easiest decision to make is to say no. It takes courage to do something different, to step off the well-worn path that people expect you to take. We are risk averse by nature. But with risk comes the opportunity for reward.

I'm a big believer in taking the opportunities that life throws at you and seeing where the journey will take you. I wouldn't be here today if I didn't.

I joined the Army while I was studying dentistry – it was my first real risk opportunity. I was living away from home and the Army offered a great scholarship deal – really, I just needed the money to get through university – but that reward came with significant risk, signing on to be a serving member of our Defence Forces. My contract was a minimum of 2 ½ years, but loved the job so much I stayed for 7 years working as an Army dentist across Victoria, New South Wales and Western Australia.

Although I never got the opportunity to deploy overseas – that was the high risk part of the role - I feel very fortunate to have served our wonderful county alongside some amazing and dedicated men and women.

Almost by accident, I did research Masters degree looking at water fluoridation and tooth decay while I was in the Army. We were treating recruits from all over Australia, and there were very obvious differences in oral health for the bus load of kids that arrived from Sydney and Melbourne where the water is fluoridated, and Brisbane where it wasn't.

Little did I know at the time, but that research degree opened up a door to a teaching and research role here at The University of Melbourne. Thirteen of the best years of my life, teaching a generation of dentists, doing some amazing research, hopefully impacting on the oral health of the whole community and working with some of the best researchers at the best dental school in Australia – I think I'm still contractually obliged to say that?

My biggest mistake about 15 years ago was turning up to the Annual General Meeting of the Australian Dental Association Victorian Branch not long after I had moved back to Melbourne. What I didn't realise is that no-one turns up to AGMs, so my attendance was taken as a signal that I must be interested in volunteering for the Association. Next thing I knew, I was on the governing Council. It was one of the career defining moves of my life – not that I knew it at the time.

As a consequence, I have been fortunate enough to serve on the Board and as President of the Australian Dental Association here in Victoria, as well as on the Federal ADA Council and now as the Victorian Branch CEO. I guess that makes me a leader in our profession. Certainly not a place that I ever expected to be in.

But when I reflect, it occurs to me that we are all leaders.

Some of you will lead a dental team. Run your own private practice or manage a public clinic. Some of you will volunteer in your professional associations or get involved in teaching and research. All of these things will require you to demonstrate leadership.

But you will also be leaders in your community – and this is a role that you should absolutely embrace.

Dental professionals are well respected in the community, and we always rate highly in surveys of trust and ethics. Sure, we're not nurses, but at least we're not politicians.

We should never take that trust for granted.

And we should use our position of trust and respect not just to improve the oral health of the patients in our practices, but look at how we can leverage that trust and respect to improve the health and well-being of the whole community.

Because that's what leaders do.

People often ask me why I'm in public health. It's certainly not the sexiest area of health to work in.

I actually think we should all be in public health.

Public health improves health. Millions of people at a time.

That's what gets me excited each day at work, and that's what keeps me awake at night.

As I look out at the faces of young graduands I am filled with hope for the future of our professions.

You have all worked hard.

It's hard to get into the best dental school in the best university in Australia.

Even harder to get through your respective courses.

Take the opportunity to savour that today. Take it all in, and celebrate with your friends and family – the people who have helped support you to achieve great success.

Then take a deep breath.

Because the really hard work starts tomorrow, when you go out into the world to start work as a dentist, an oral health therapist, a dental specialist or an academic.

That's when you are going to change the world.

Congratulations and good luck.

Vice-Chancellor's Introduction

This afternoon the University welcomes Dr Matthew Hopcraft as guest speaker.

With more than 25 years in the dental industry, Matt is a recognised leader and expert in dental public health and advocacy. As a dentist he has worked in the Army, private and public dental practices, and as an academic at The University of Melbourne.

He co-founded SugarFree Smiles to advocate for measures to improve oral health in the community. He is an experienced speaker and media voice, and a strong advocate for healthy eating.

Matthew has enjoyed a wide variety of experiences in his dental career – working in remote Aboriginal communities on the Cape York Peninsula, and in Tonga; presenting dental research at conferences in Europe and North America; and being involved in the education of approximately 1000 dentists at the Melbourne Dental School, including a role as the Director of Clinical Education, during his time in the Australian Army.

Matthew is currently the CEO of the Australian Dental Association Victorian Branch.

Please join me in welcoming Dr Matthew Hopcraft.