

Occasional Address – Darlene Cox, 29 March 2023

I acknowledge I'm on Ngunnawal land and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging leaders. I acknowledge that this land was never ceded.

Thank you for the invitation to speak today. I feel incredibly honoured to be here with you.

So you might be wondering why a consumer advocate is talking to you today? Why not a health professional? Good question.

One of the reasons I am here is to remind you that the work you have done through your degree, and the work you will do in your career, is about us - consumers and our families.

I work at the Health Care Consumers' Association. This is the peak consumer advocacy organisation in the Canberra region on health care. We advocate for consumer interests in health care. We are a community group made up of individuals and organisations who share an interest in high quality health care that meets the needs of consumers, carers and our communities. A strong workforce is an important part of that.

I want to thank you for making the decision to go into these caring professions. This is not easy work and you will often give more of yourselves than you will receive in financial payment. But professions are more than about money – although that helps. You are contributing to society and the health of others.

You are making lives better. Whether you are providing care at the bedside, or helping to diagnose disease, or supporting us in our recovery, - your compassion, reassurance and ability to help us to understand what is happening to us at times of deep stress, when we are not feeling well and we have lost a sense of control. This is important work. Our communities, our society, values the work you have all trained to do.

What do consumers need from you? I've asked this question, or a variation of it, to consumers lots of times. People tell me the same things:

*"I need to be listened to".*

*"I want my clinicians to understand where I'm coming from, see that I am more than my disease."*

*"I don't want them to judge me."*

*"I want them to help me to understand what is happening to me."*

They rarely talk about clinical competence. And I suppose that is not surprising in many ways as this is jargon more suited to professional standards and registration than the way consumers talk about health care.

It is implied in these response. We assume that our health practitioners are clinically competent. We have a fundamental trust in your ability and the institutions that have trained you.

We want to be listened to, feel seen and heard, because for consumers – your patients –, feeling cared for is part of our experience. For many, it's as important as the treatment we receive. And that applies across nursing, pharmacy, physios, OTs and health service executives. The experience of being treated or care for by a health professional who has been friendly, generous with their time and knowledge, and considerate of our needs never leaves you. Kindness matters. So be kind. It is your superpower.

Health care is relationship-based work. We will always need the technical skills, the calibration of equipment, understanding of medications, lifesaving procedures that is a core part of your training. But overwhelmingly, for consumers, good relationships

with their health practitioners, built on trust and an exchange of knowledge – that's what makes good health care.

That relationship may be in one encounter, or one shift, or over a longer period.

That relationship is not just an indulgence. Those pieces of information we share with you can have a critical impact on the treatment pathway and health outcome for that person.

Here, I see graduates who want to be great clinicians. You want to do your jobs well, and we need you to. It won't always be easy. You will have a few challenges along the way. I have been around the block a few times and I can see the increasing pressure in our health system. Consumers and carers feel it. Staff feel it. This makes me worry for you, as you will all be faced with the challenge of knowing what great care looks like but not having enough time to deliver it every time.

You will face situations that may compromise your ability to be the clinician you want to be: to really know and care about your patients, to support your colleagues, to have enough time to put into reflection and learning your craft, and just as importantly, time for yourselves, outside of being a health professional.

To me this is truly one of the wicked problems of our health system. How do we build enough time in our systems and processes to make health care more person centred.

Self-care is important. It is a serious need for anyone in the health system. From the consumer perspective we need you to be well trained and well supported in your workplace. We need you to be looking after yourselves so that you can come to work and deliver the quality of care that we need from you.

You cannot provide consumer centred care if you are not okay.

So what do I mean by consumer-centred care? You will have heard this term a lot in your training. Let me share what it means to me:

- Get to know your patients
- Be mindful of the way you speak to us and the way you speak about us

- help us to participate in our own care
- be curious and ask questions
- See us as part of the team. This is about your work and about our lives. We absolutely want to be part of the team.

There are other issues that will shape your practice:

- Embrace the new technology – the digital health record is just the start. Virtual care presents exciting opportunities to make health care more accessible to many people.
- Be curious. Keep learning and contributing to the collective knowledge base. Participate in research projects and quality improvement projects. It's not just medical doctors who c. We can all do research that leads to improving the quality and safety of health care– including consumers and carers.
- Think about the health of our planet. Look for ways to reduce the carbon footprint and greenhouse gas emissions in your practice.

So – I'm wrapping up. In summary

- Hold on to your training. Use it as an anchor to help you remember what is important.
- Build strong relationships with your peers. Team work is critical to your success. And see us as a member of the team. Do it with us, not to us
- Be kind - to your patients and our families, to your work colleagues and to yourself and your families. You need to be a whole person so you are able to provide the holistic care we need from you.

Congratulations on your graduation. This is a significant personal achievement for all of you and your families and supporters.

I wish you well in your transition to practice. You are doing important work and we need you.

Be curious. Be safe. Be kind. Remember, kindness is your superpower.

Thank you