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Occasional Address

Faculty of Health Graduation - University of Canberra

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Before I begin, I wish to acknowledge the Ngunnawal people as the traditional custodians of the land we are meeting on, and thank Selina Walker, for her Welcome to Country.

I have been fortunate, as has your Vice Chancellor, to have been taught by a Ngunnawal elder, to provide Acknowledgement of Country in language, and I would like to share that with you all today. I was taught to take a deep breath, and breathe down to the land, to feel that connection with the country upon which we live, and I encourage you all to take a deep, connecting breath with me now.

Dhawura nguna, dhawura Ngunnawal

Yanggu ngalaweri, dhunimanyin

Ngunnawalwari dhawurawari

Nginggada Dindi wanggiraldjinyin

This is Ngunnawal Country. Today we are gathering for your graduation, on Ngunnawal Country.

We respect the Elders, female and male, and I acknowledge any other people or families with connections to the lands of the ACT and region.

I also recognise the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' vast knowledge of native plants and their uses. They were this country's first pharmacists, and I am honoured to be a pharmacist here on Ngunnawal Country.

I would also like to recognise Chancellor Lisa Paul AO PSM, Vice-Chancellor Bill Shorten, and Professor Rachel Gibson - Executive Dean of Health, distinguished guests, families and graduates.

Your graduation ceremony is a momentous occasion for you all, and for your family and loved ones. I still remember my pharmacy graduation day, and the celebrations I shared with my parents and friends.

Let's be honest, parents in the audience, you've participated in the academic learning with your child over the last few years, and a part of the accolades received today, and the parchment is yours as well.

Your Vice Chancellor introduced me earlier; however, I would like to provide you a little more detail about me. I am a pharmacist. I am the Chief Pharmacist at ACT Health. I am a credentialed diabetes educator. I have owned community pharmacies in the ACT. I am a board

director of a number of pharmacy related not-for-profit organisations. I am a hot air balloon pilot. I am a leader. I am a fierce friend.

And that sounds interesting, and speaks to a number of career successes.

But I am also a pharmacy student who failed first year of my degree at Sydney University, back when there was not a pharmacy degree available here at UC. I moved from Canberra to the big city, I had fun (!!!), I was working a few days a week, and then I got a bit homesick for my family back here, right before mid-year exams. I had, like all of you I am sure, been clever at high school. I had breezed through both high school and Copland College. But uni was a different learning experience. I didn't know how to be a university student back then, and I struggled to improve enough in second semester to pass the year.

However, what I am, is not ever a person who gives up. So, I fronted back up the next year, and repeated those subjects I had failed. I found colleagues who were good learners, and I learnt from them. I connected with my lecturers, and sought out their help and support. I worked hard, and I made it through. I didn't pass with distinctions. P's get degrees, my dad would say to me, to keep me going.

Now, you might say, she only got a Pass? Why should we listen to this woman? Well, what I lacked then in academic ability, I made up for in a number of ways, that have all led me to where I am now.

Firstly, I am passionate about, and have always advocated strongly for, my profession.

Secondly, I always say yes to opportunities, and work out how to do the thing I said yes to, later.

Third, I continue to learn and build connections.

And lastly, I align my career choices to my personal values – I try to live and work with integrity, respect, courage, generosity and kindness.

Let's start with advocacy and saying yes. Back in my undergrad days, I joined the Sydney Uni Pharmacy Association. When I graduated, I joined the NSW Branch of the Pharmaceutical Society, the professional body for pharmacists, and I was one of their first early-career pharmacists. When the Chair asked if I would like to go to the International Pharmacy Federation conference in Nice, I said "yes please"!

When my father and I competed in a hot air ballooning competition in Mildura in 1999, and came third, we were able to attend the World Hot Air Ballooning Championships in Austria (no kangaroos there). I figured if I was paying for an airfare to Europe, I should go and work in the UK for a while and ended up in a hospital pharmacy in a little town called Harrogate.

When I came back to Canberra after that, I went looking for locum work and met a pharmacist who would later become my business partner. Indeed, during my "interview" we talked about hot air ballooning, and kayaking, and travelling the world, and eventually I had to ask him if I had the job! I did get it, because our conversation meant he was able to decide he liked my work ethic and my values.

Sometime later, when I was managing the pharmacy in Chisholm, he asked me if I would like to become an owner. In my mind, I was thinking, are you crazy? I've never done any business studies! So, I said "yes thanks", but I would like to do a Grad Cert in Pharmacy Management first. Turns out, it was great learning, but he was right, I had already learnt the skills I needed – being a good pharmacist, running a business with my numbers brain, and most of all, people skills!

I transitioned to the ACT Branch of the Pharmaceutical Society, and when I bought my pharmacy, I joined the ACT Branch of the Pharmacy Guild. I continued to advocate for my profession, and when an opportunity came up to become the President of the ACT Branch of the Guild... only 11 months after having my now teenager... I of course, said "yes". That might have also been something to do with the sleep deprivation though...

Despite my lacklustre undergrad marks, I have since become a life-long student, a life-long learner. As all health professionals know, the content you have learnt during your degree, is not going to be all the learning you need to know between now and when you retire. You will continue to do formal and informal learning.

By 2014, I had become passionate about assisting people with diabetes. I experienced gestational diabetes when pregnant with both my babies and decided to enrol at UTS to become a diabetes educator.

I know that in this room, there are pharmacists like me, and there are also graduates who have studied optometry, nutrition and dietetics, OT, physiotherapy and psychology - speech pathology, health science, and sport & exercise science.

There will be almost no one graduating here today, who will not care for a person with diabetes during their career. By 2021, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) estimated 1 in 20 Australians were living with diabetes. That's just over 1.3 million people.

In Australia, about 2.3% of the total Australian health expenditure is attributed to people with diabetes. Many of these people will come to you during your career, for support, advice and care.

But, none of them will come to you with diabetes alone. By supporting them to manage their diabetes, you will likely improve their heart disease, kidney disease, and retinopathy, and by assisting them to move more and eat well, you may improve all of these conditions, as well as their quality of life, and their mental health and wellbeing.

However, you cannot do any of these things without connection. You must strive to form a rapport with your patients, with your colleagues, and within multi-disciplinary teams. Without connection, your patients may not be open to learning from you and take the things you teach them, back into their day to day lives. Without connection, you may not be able to build rapport with colleagues with whom you will work closely every day, and who may become your next teacher, your mentor, or your next employer.

One of my favourite professional experiences since becoming a diabetes educator was working in a local medical centre, providing education to patients in the practice. When I first started there, I was a little nervous, this was, after all, a new scope of practice for me. I made sure I was organised, I provided my patients with quality clinical care, and I worked with the person's GP to

direct their diabetes care. Over the time I worked there, the GPs and I began to learn to trust each other's skills and knowledge. I was also able to engage with the exercise physiologists and dietitians in the practice, and it was a truly wonderful example of the benefits of multi-disciplinary care for positive patient outcomes.

By now, you might realise that life-long learning and career transitions are a bit of a thing for me. I like new challenges, and I like to try new things. This led to me deciding to undertake an MBA with QUT. This time I completed the degree with Distinction, so I had come a long way in my academic career!

I thought I might go on to work within a health-based not-for-profit. Of course, COVID-19 came along and decided to change my plans. So there I was, having sold my pharmacy, with a shiny new MBA, and a new plan for my career, and suddenly, my colleagues needed as many pharmacists as they could find. I spent months vaccinating more people than I can count, with covid vaccines. Those crazy covid years came and went, and then in 2022 I thought it was time to go back to my plans to transition into something new.

One day, a colleague contacted me and let me know that ACT Health was recruiting for an Acting Chief Pharmacist. The role was advertised for just 9 months, and it seemed an opportunity to try something new. I figured I would do this for a little while, and then get back to my not-for-profit plans, with a new string to my bow, a new skill and experience on my resume.

Of course, given it's now 2025, I am sure you can all tell I have stayed in the role. Amazingly, it feels like I have moved full circle. I started my career as a pharmacist advocating for my profession, and now in my current role, I have the opportunity to progress change for my profession.

Somehow, I have come into this role, at a time when many health professions are looking to expand their scope of practice.

There will likely never be enough health dollars available in the entire health system, however if all professions are supported to work at the top of their scope, this may alleviate pressures on the acute healthcare system. And should ensure you are all working in ways that satisfy you, provide you a sense of accomplishment, provide positive outcomes for your patients, and support you to remain connected to your profession for longer.

You may be aware registered nurses have recently received agreement for the nursing board to endorse them to prescribe scheduled medicines. The physio board is also exploring the topic of physio prescribing in multi-disciplinary teams. Optometrists, podiatrists, and midwives may already seek endorsement from AHPRA, the regulating body, to prescribe scheduled medicines.

And I encourage those of you who aren't pharmacists, to find a pharmacist friend in this room. You may one day want to ask them a question, and as the medicines' experts, they will be able to work collaboratively with you to support your patients' safe and effective use of medicines.

Now that you have finished your degree, and regardless of the health profession you're now in, I would like to encourage you:

- To step bravely into your career.

- To always ask questions.
- To always say yes to opportunities, and work out how to do it later
- To continue learning.
- To find a mentor or two, who can support you with different aspects of your career.
- AND, to remember to find time for family, with friends, and by yourself.
- To look after your own health and wellbeing. What works for you? Exercise, reading, cooking, travel, or being outdoors? Or, like me, spending the last week flying over Canberra in my hot air balloon.

I mentioned earlier, the importance of the families in this room, supporting you through your degree. And whilst some of you may not be from Canberra, and may return home to undertake your careers, I offer a reminder....

Canberra is a small world, and you never know, the parents you meet this afternoon may become a future employer, or patient, or colleague. So always take the opportunity to meet people and see what opportunities may arise. And when they do, please say yes!