

# Has the ascent of mankind's health peaked?

In his address to the University of Adelaide's 2015 medical graduates, **E/Prof Alastair MacLennan** considered the improvements in population health over the last two centuries and what that means for health care into the future; and the proliferation of unproven alternative therapies. These are two of the major challenges to be faced as the health of the nation is handed over to its new medical graduates, he says. This is an extract from his speech.

**W**E have seen major improvements in population health in the last two centuries thanks to the ethos of trying to test scientifically the efficacy and safety of old and new therapeutic options.

But now we are handing over the health of the nation to you graduates at a time when public health has the potential to deteriorate due to uncontrolled and unproven alternative therapies – and a proliferation of other Australian graduate 'doctors' of naturopathy, homeopathy, iridology, reflexology, osteopathy and chiropractic.

I shall explain, but let's remember what has happened to date.

Charles Darwin would be amazed that, since his death just 160 years ago, men and women have evolved rapidly from having an average of 18 pregnancies, with a very high infant and maternal mortality rate, to an average of 1.8 pregnancies with very low mortality.

Over the same time, the average age of a mother's first birth has moved from 17 to 30 years of age. Women's life expectancy has increased from an average age of 41 in Darwin's time, to an average age of 86 in 2015.

In Darwin's day, women usually died rapidly, before the end of reproductive life, from haemorrhage and sepsis. But now women face a slow deterioration in health with an average of nine disability years, in the care of others; and from new diseases often associated with longevity, such as cardiovascular disease, age-related cancers, dementia or hip fracture.

Men have a shorter period of six disability years before, presumably, being shot by their wives!

What extraordinary evolution in such a short time. *We have a new way of life and a new way of death!*

The rapid evolution and the ascent of mankind's health are due mostly to major

and health challenges such as more wars, mass starvation, mass migration, pan epidemics and reduced health budgets.

Despite the growing world population – mostly in underdeveloped countries – in developed countries such as Australia, women are delaying pregnancy and are having less than two children per family with a projected average of 1.4 in Australia by the next decade.

It looks as if we are going to have more grandparents than grandchildren.

So some of the challenges for you Australian graduates will be population longevity and chronic disability.

Another problem today is the unabated challenge of non-evidence-based alternative medicine – the selling of 'woo' to an unscientific public. You will need to practise evidence-based medicine to overcome real health issues and not succumb to selling the 'worried well' nonsense-based placebos that they think they need because Ricky Ponting and Oprah Winfrey promote them.

Prof David Gorski, a critic of alternative medicine, recently said:

*"When health fraud turned into 'alternative medicine' and then evolved into 'complementary and alternative medicine' and then reached its final form of 'integrative medicine' the language war was lost. That's how quackery became accepted as mainstream."*

However, your degree in evidence-based medicine and surgery is a quality degree of which to be proud. Many Australian universities and colleges – but not to its great credit the University of



improvements in medical research, education and clinical practice. But these huge changes in demographics are going to give you graduates very different public health challenges from those faced by us on this stage.

When I was born there were two billion people on this earth and now there are seven billion with an expectation of 11 billion in your lifetime.

The increasing overcrowding on our planet will bring you graduates political

Adelaide – have succumbed to the financial lure of running pseudo-scientific degree courses with very low entrance scores, in unproven therapies such as iridology, naturopathy, homeopathy, reflexology, kinesiology, healing touch, aromatherapy and chiropractic.

A sub-group of chiropractors make unscientific and baseless claims that they can ‘adjust’ and correct mythical and invisible ‘subluxations’ that are magically connected to all types of organ dysfunction, and in particular childhood diseases, which can then be cured by their magical adjustments. Some alternative practitioners are anti-vaccination decreasing the herd immunity of Australians. Polio and tuberculosis could return to our shores. You will need to compete against these alternative medicine graduates and their potential to give misinformation, delay effective therapies, and sometimes cause serious adverse events such as stroke after neck manipulation.

You will also need to work against your elected government and its unwillingness to regulate both individual snake-oil salesmen and large Australian alternative medicine companies that push the extensive use of unnecessary vitamins or supplements. Australia’s political parties tacitly accept minimal regulation of alternative therapies and alternative therapists, because they accept huge donations from the alternative medicine industry.

Now I am not against the right of an informed public to use belief-based alternative therapies and therapists. Many in this audience will want to believe in them and I support their right to choose when given accurate information.

But we should fight against the commercial purveyors of alternative therapies who make false claims for the therapies they sell. The high and increasing use of alternative therapies is a testament only to widespread advertising and not to their efficacy and safety. Last month the *New England Journal of Medicine* recorded in the US 23,000 hospital admissions per year for adverse events after the use of so-called health supplements.

But don’t think that these will be your only battles against quackery after graduation. Your next King of Australia, Charles, is a fervent supporter of alternative medicine and its hocus pocus. Prince Charles helped fund the first chair of alternative medicine in Exeter, UK, and then had its chair, Professor Edzard Ernst, dismissed because Professor Ernst was evidence based and kept publishing that there was no good evidence to support any complementary therapy.

In Queen’s Square London, there is the very distinguished National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery – but it has no royal imprimatur. Next to it is The Royal London Homeopathic Hospital, recently renamed the Royal London Hospital for Integrative Medicine.

So you will have to stand up against Oprah Winfrey, Ricky Ponting, your government and your next king ... and forego your knighthood!

The degree you receive today, after six years of learning, has given you the ability to discriminate between nonsense, belief-based commercial medicine, and on the other hand, scientifically evidence-based therapies that benefit the patient and not you. That very important piece of paper you will receive on this platform today is testimony that you can, and will, practice evidence-based medicine for the good of your patients.

Alternative practitioners do not have the exclusive license on empathy and compassion. You are very capable of that too, and you have therapeutic honesty. Sometimes you can offer no therapy but with sympathy and humanity explain why – and help them avoid the expensive, useless and potentially dangerous therapies offered by dubious ‘wellness institutes’.

The word ‘wellness’ is the badge of quackery!

So has the ascent of mankind’s health peaked? Will it now decline? Can you graduates meet these challenges?

Will Australia become a country of infertile, obese, infirm and insolvent geriatrics spending their last savings on ginseng and phytoestrogens, with few Australians young enough to look after them?

Having met you, I have every faith that you will meet these challenges.



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### Welcoming Dr Yew Toh Wong

BMBS MD FRCS (Gen/Vasc) FRACS (Vasc)  
Vascular and endovascular surgeon

Dr Yew Toh Wong has commenced private practice, consulting from Calvary Wakefield Hospital. He continues to be active in clinical research and has an interest in value based healthcare research.

Areas of special clinical interest are:

- diabetes limb salvage
- complex aneurysms
- varicose veins
- venous stenting
- IVC filter and retroperitoneal lymph nodes dissection.

For appointments:

Wakefield Clinic, Level 1,  
270 Wakefield Street, Adelaide  
T: (08) 8359 2411  
E: wakefield@sagroup.net.au  
W: southernvascularspecialist.com.au

Continuing the Mission of the Sisters  
of the Little Company of Mary

300 Wakefield Street Adelaide SA 5000  
T: (08) 8405 3333 calvarywakefield.org.au



Wakefield Hospital

CD145