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OPENING ADDRESS TO THE AUSTRALASIAN DOCTORS' HEALTH CONFERENCE 2015

MELBOURNE

FRIDAY 23 OCTOBER 2015

AMA VICE PRESIDENT DR STEPHEN PARNIS

***Check against delivery

Physician, Heal Thyself

I begin by acknowledging the Wurundjeri People, the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, and pay my respects to their elders, past and present.

I congratulate the Australasian Doctors' Health Network and the Victorian Doctors' Health Program, in particular, for making this Conference happen. It is an honour to formally open this conference.

This biennial doctors' health conference has become an important event on the medical calendar, because it is devoted to such an important topic – our own health and wellbeing, which is, of itself, an absolute necessity for safe and effective medical practice.

I note the impressive program being put before you over the coming two days, covering a broad spectrum of issues facing the profession.

Issues such as the interface between impairment and performance, preventive strategies and education, and the place of professionalism in our conduct will be considered. I need not remind you how important these are in not only the health and wellbeing of our profession, but in the confidence the Australian community places in us.

It is pleasing that the Conference has a positive theme – “Pathways and Progress”.

I believe that we are indeed making progress, and developing structures, processes, and evidence to improve our understanding of, and care for, the health and welfare of our colleagues.

I think we are all aware that health for doctors, both physical and mental, is not a given.

Whether it is for our colleagues, or ourselves, we all have anecdotes that indicate our personal frailties.

It is encouraging that individual doctors as well as organisations such as hospital and employer networks, medical schools, and the learned colleges are taking steps to support doctors to understand and adopt, as a high priority, a healthy lifestyle throughout their medical training and professional careers.

Within the AMA and the profession more generally, there has been a welcome increase in the awareness of doctors' health issues in recent years.

Much of this is being driven by the younger members of our profession. We owe them a great deal for their initiative and drive, and their courage.

But there is much more to do.

As doctors, we spend a great deal of time and effort training in the clinical aspects of our work.

I'm sure we don't spend enough time on the aspects of our work that might collectively be called professionalism - leadership, working in multi-disciplinary teams, providing feedback, negotiation and conflict resolution, and time management.

This, in turn, may leave us poorly prepared for many of the stressors of life as a doctor.

Prime examples are bullying and harassment in the workplace: they are serious stressors, widely prevalent, and have health implications for the profession.

The events of this year, which started with comments about sexual harassment in surgery, have resulted in the recognition that there are problems with some aspects of surgical culture, with implications to varying degrees across the entire medical profession.

While it will be painful for many, it is necessary that we continue to have open disclosure, a determination to educate current and future members of the profession, and to support those who have never known any other way to interact.

Speaking for myself, I have been a part of the medical profession since entering medical school in 1987.

I have been an advanced trainee in surgery, and I have had personal experience of some of the issues uncovered this year.

I have sought the advice and care of medical colleagues when I have found the pressures of my career overwhelming, and I am eternally grateful for their expertise and compassion. They have played a part in me becoming the doctor that I am today.

I have grieved for friends and colleagues who have harmed themselves or taken their own life, and I am well and truly over a culture of finger-pointing and blame.

We must encourage an environment in the medical profession where positive approaches are taken - good role models, work-life balance, accessible care, practical education, and cultural change for the better.

As medical professionals, we have a responsibility to ensure that programs exist to assist our colleagues to access quality health care when they need it.

We need to promote good health and the adoption of a healthy lifestyle throughout a doctor's training and career.

For the medical profession, doctors' health services are important not only for the provision of health services, but also in prevention, education, and research. I know that, around Australia, some of these programs already exist.

The AMA has, for a number of years, had strong links to existing doctors' health services across the country.

Our State AMAs have provided financial and in-kind support for doctors' health advisory services in a number of States and Territories.

These services are mostly provided by volunteers. Many of them are here this morning. I wish to thank them for devoting so much of their own time and energy to the health and welfare of our profession.

As a Victorian AMA Board member, then President, I became very familiar with the work of the Victorian Doctors Health Program.

I recall the anxieties of recent years when the transition from State to National medical registration led to uncertainty about its funding future.

This was a concern shared by a number of doctors' health services around Australia.

Unfortunately, the level of services has varied across the country. But I am pleased to say that the situation is changing for the better.

The AMA and the Australasian Doctors' Health Network have been strong advocates for Medical Board funding of more formal programs.

Our aspirations were realised in April this year when the AMA and the Medical Board announced that they would join forces on doctors' health.

The Board is providing \$2 million annually, indexed for inflation, to fund the health programs to deliver a nationally consistent suite of services encompassing advice and referral, education and awareness, and general advocacy to doctors and medical students in all States and Territories.

The AMA has established a wholly-owned subsidiary, Doctors' Health Services Pty Ltd, to coordinate the delivery of the services and ensure that they are delivered at arm's length from the regulator - that is, the Medical Board.

This new company has its own governing Board, and is being advised by an Expert Advisory Council made up of representatives of the health services, doctors in training, medical students, and the AMA.

Indeed, Dr Kym Jenkins is the Chair of this important body.

The implementation of the new arrangements for doctors' health programs is progressing well, and the programs are on target to be operational by the end of next year.

This is a very significant and positive initiative in the delivery of services for doctors.

I am confident that it will help improve the level of support given to the profession.

To care for one's colleagues is not an easy thing, because it entails significant risk.

But there are real rewards and satisfaction for those who do. I want to acknowledge and encourage you.

We will all end up being a patient at times during our career, and the challenge is to practise what we preach to our own patients.

We need to be honest, to be open to uncomfortable advice from our doctors, and to recognise our own limitations.

Apart from improving our own health, I am sure it will make us all better doctors.

Once again, a big welcome to everyone. I hope you all enjoy the Conference, and take home some important information and lessons.

23 October 2015

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