

SCU Graduation Occasional Address

Mrs Anna Dicker'

4.30pm, Saturday, 28 November 2015
Whitebrook Theatre, Lismore Campus

I would like to begin by acknowledging the Widjabal People of the Bundjalung Nation, traditional custodians of the land on which this event is taking place, and pay tribute to the unique role they play in the life of this region.

Deputy Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen and of course, you, the graduands.

Congratulations to all the graduands today.

I have had a life of privilege. I have not had a major illness, I have not lost a child, been raped, kidnapped or shot at. I have not experienced great hardship. Importantly I have loved my career which has led me on many adventures and to many different areas of the world.

However I have seen things that one should not see, I have witnessed suffering that is beyond my comprehension, I jump out of my skin when hearing fireworks or balloons break. I remember too much at times. Sometimes all I have been able to do is to hold someone's hand as they died.

At the age of 60 after decades of working in a clinical and management role I joined MSF, wanting to contribute to humanity in the time I had left. This

journey has challenged me on so many levels – professionally, physically, socially and spiritually. I have left my comfort zone in Australia and joined dedicated teams of people from all over the world. These are not just staff from privileged countries but I have also worked with nurses and doctors from Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Armenia and Nepal to name a few. These are the management team while most of the clinical work is done by national staff of the country we are working in.

As challenging as it is, this work is extremely rewarding. I have been deployed in Darfur, (Sudan), Nigeria, Laos, Syria and Eastern Ukraine in 5 war zones. On deployment resources are very basic, living conditions even more basic – often we only have periodic electricity and hot water can become a luxury. There are long hours and frustrating situations.

We are given one life and one body. What you do with each is largely up to you and will determine your place on this earth.

I am going to pick out some of the most important things I have learnt along the way and would really have liked to know at the beginning of my career.

Opportunity- There are choices presenting themselves all the time. We can make good or bad choices but as long as you think them through and weigh up the advantages and disadvantages there is no such thing as a wrong choice. My philosophy is to open yourself to opportunities – you can always say no at any time. Apply for jobs that interest you because our working life is long and one

should never be bored. When you feel you know it all, look around and ask yourself how you can improve.

Fear – Fear is simply storytelling in your mind. Most of the time the picture you build up does not happen. Our imagination runs riot and the maybes get bigger and bigger until fear overcomes us and we say – no I can't do it!

Don't let fear rule your life and stand in the way of your achievements. But I must add that I do do a risk assessment of deployments that I am offered and there are countries like Afghanistan and Somalia that I will draw a line at and not go there.

Ongoing Learning- Never stop learning. You cant know everything and should look to those who can teach you more. There is always something new to learn – Example in Syria – In my first week the French anaesthetist taught me to group and match blood, take arterial blood and to do an auto transfusion. Before the week was out I had had to do all three. Surprisingly you never forget your skills. I had a patient with a blocked tracheotomy after being shot in the neck – none of my staff had ever seen one before. However I instinctively knew what to do . Later I was winding the clock back and realised that I had not even seen a tracheotomy since my student nurse days.

I have been to the top of many different fields but there is always something else to learn and extend me. I took on the Masters of Community Development –Emergency Management at the age of 60 – at the same time as my daughter Kiri. It was not long after the Indian Ocean Tsunami. I worked through the issues

of I'm too old, it's too expensive and I'll never use it but it has opened up a whole new world and career at the time where most people are wanting to retire. I must add that it also put the icing on the cake in terms of understanding the building blocks of successful interventions. If you can start solving problems from the bottom up in a way that is acceptable to your audience you are much more likely to come up with successful and sustainable outcomes. In health there can often be a band aid approach that only lasts for the life of the bandaid. We are always advising people to make lifestyle changes without understanding just how that can be achieved.

Teaching –Don't keep your knowledge to yourself. But learn the art of teaching on a level that will be understood. The simpler the explanation the better – the KISS principle.

Recently I was doing some policy review work for an NGO. I went to their website and tried to make sense of what was written there. I needed a dictionary in one hand as the author had obviously wanted to impress with his use of exotic and fancy language. Consequently no one could understand it and their donation base was very low. Same with speaking to your patients and clients. Work at the level that can be understood. To talk in nursing speak –take your tablets TDS or PRN, is easy for us but incomprehensible to most people.

Death - The will to live is very strong but everyone dies sooner or later. We can't always prevent it but we can be there for people and their loved ones. Be kind to people who are going through this journey. Understand the dying and the grief process so you are confident to deal with these situations. In Syria,

particularly I was dealing with mass casualties in a small makeshift trauma hospital. We could not save everybody- that is the reality of war. But we made sure that those who were dying had someone allocated to be with them so they were not alone. Is that important? Well we don't really know but it just seems right to me to do it.

Human Rights. Mans inhumanity to man. Unfortunate but true. When the social rules break down man is a violent being. It appals me to witness the depths of this violence. Be careful of your own safety. Be mindful of the fact that women, children, the elderly and minority groups are often targets for violence and that we must be protective. Be aware of basic human rights. Are you aware that there are 30 basic human rights agreed to by the United Nations in 1948. A few of these are the Right to asylum, no Torture, the right to rest and play, the right to a nationality. If you don't know them look them up. There is also international humanitarian law under the Geneva Convention that says hospitals and health workers must not be harmed. The bombing of hospitals in Afghanistan, Yemen and Syria are crimes. Even War has Rules.

Style- What will your style be?? You need to think about it. My style is a Mamma Anna style. I try not be threatening or paternalistic. I try to be caring and kind.

I was in Istanbul with The Australian Civilian Corps a few months after returning from Syria. We were visiting an NGO that was doing training and capacity building in the area that I had been in (1000km away) . I asked Omar if he would tell the people on his next visit that Mamma Anna still loved them. He stopped

and said “I have heard of Mamma Anna” Then he looked at me and said “are you Mamma Anna?” When I nodded he burst into tears. It was a profound moment – I thought about it – 1000 wounded patients in 3 months – They each probably would have told 10 people about this old Australian woman in charge of the hospital – that’s 10,000 people who would have heard about me. The message is ‘be aware how you present yourself because you come in contact and influence a countless number of people’.

Respect- Respect people’s bodies, their culture, their personalities. Respect their personal and economic situation. Respect yourself and your abilities.

Believe In yourself –you are capable of more than you could possibly imagine.

Be gentle- particularly in health that is what is valued most. When I am recruiting I actually look for human kindness as much as qualifications. No matter what field you work in, kindness creates peace and harmony with your colleagues and your clients.

Crossroads – Every career has setbacks but every setback is a crossroad that will inevitably lead to something else. I had a back injury that made clinical nursing no longer possible but lead me into management which was the skill that MSF was looking for. Looking at setbacks in a positive light enhances possibilities and builds resilience.

Look at the bigger picture. Sometimes the small stuff can make us lose sight of the solutions. For example in Laos I was trying to teach handwashing – but the

only clean water was that which they caught in the breaks in guttering when it rained. They also were not able to buy soap or hand towels. Focussing only on the problem often only leads to short term solutions. Put in the building blocks for changes to occur.

Silence and listening are very powerful. Especially when dealing with grief. Be aware of what is your stuff to own and what is not. We cannot share everyone's experience but we can listen. In Darfur I could not grasp the struggle of the IDPs (internally displaced people) until I started to listen to their stories. One by one the staff shared their terrible stories with me, often so overwhelmed that they broke down in tears. They said that in 4 years no one had ever asked before and how important it was to be listened to.

Every person is an individual and has their own belief system. You need to tap into that to understand them and to help them. People need to take ownership of their own situation to make improvements.

Most people are resilient. Give them a little time and options. But ask people how you can best help them. And give them some time to help themselves. Respect their choices. We had a patient in the rebel held area in Darfur who travelled to us at great risk. He had type 1 diabetes and required insulin. However we had little supply, he had no refrigeration and would not leave his family to live in a nearby government held town where insulin was available. But these were choices that only he could make.

Remember you are human and not immune to what is going on around you. In Syria I had to conduct triage during mass casualties. It may sound exciting but it is tragic and takes its toll. Your colleagues, family and friends are the best network to debrief with.

Congratulations to all of you. Graduation is the first step to realising how little you actually know. But an important step to finding out.