

Mrs Marjorie Jackson-Nelson AC, CVO, MBE - Address to Graduands

Awarded a Doctor of the University from Flinders University in April 2018

Good morning Chancellor, Deputy Vice Chancellor, Executive Staff, Academic Staff And Graduates, As Well As Their Families And Friends.

I would like to thank The Flinders University of South Australia for deeming that I be bestowed with this honorary degree of doctorate of the university.

I am delighted to be here today to witness the graduation of students who have studied in the health sciences disciplines and I do hope that you enjoy hearing this snippet of my life's journey:

When I lost my husband, Peter, to acute myeloid leukaemia in 1977 I vowed to try and do something to help other sufferers of this insidious disease.

My non-medical background as a former Olympic athlete and subsequently a retailer, certainly didn't equip me to assist in a "hands on" way! So, I decided that perhaps I could lead a fundraising effort based in South Australia with a goal to raise one million dollars.

If I managed to raise that million dollars then perhaps those funds could provide for a dedicated researcher to concentrate solely on leukaemia and in particular acute myeloid leukaemia (of which I will from now on refer to as AML).

In 1977 with the assistance of the State Government and Rotary International, the Peter Nelson Leukaemia Research Fund was launched in Rundle Mall, Adelaide and is now administered by the Cancer Council of SA.

Since that historic launch more than seven million dollars has been raised and that money now self-funds a permanent leukaemia researcher.

This could not have been achieved without the unwavering support of a small team of dedicated volunteers.

Wherever your career in health takes you after today, you will no doubt cross paths with many volunteers in your line of work. They may be "hands on" helpers that assist with patient care and wellbeing or they may be fundraising for medical research, or they may be assisting with finding housing for the family members of those in poor health who have made the trip to the city from rural areas for medical treatment.

I urge you to take the time to acknowledge their hard work and commitment. Without volunteers the medical community would not be able to devote their valuable resources - as much as they currently do - to the frontline of patient care.

I am proud that the research fund has managed to support nine leukaemia researchers since its inception.

Progress has been made and the research conducted by Dr Hayley Ramshaw, (our most recent Peter Nelson Leukaemia Research Fellow) over the past decade has focused on the development of specific therapies for people with AML.

AML can be a devastating disease and the current treatment options are: to give patients chemotherapy, (which is essentially a toxin that kills both healthy cells and malignant ones), or a bone marrow/stem cell transplant.

For patients given chemotherapy: there is a high relapse rate and the recurring disease is often more aggressive than the original leukaemia.

For a transplant: a matched donor needs to be found and a patient is given some rather awful preconditioning so that their body will accept the transplant.

Each of these options reduce the number of patients that are able to have transplant therapy.

The antibody we have developed was originally cultivated in a mouse in the lab of Professor Angel Lopez in Adelaide.

Hayley, along with Prof Lopez, generated data to show the potential of this as a therapy for AML patients. This was made possible by the support of the Peter Nelson Leukaemia Research Fund.

This data attracted the interest from CSL (the largest pharmaceutical company in Australia) who further developed the antibody by humanising it so it could be given to people without raising an immune reaction.

CAL then proceeded to clinical trial in Australia to show that there were no ill effects from this antibody in patients.

In 2013 Janssen (the pharmaceutical arm of Johnson and Johnson) licensed the antibody for further development.

Several clinical trials have now been designed in both the USA and Europe, and, while currently there are no patients being actively recruited, the value of antibody therapy remains unquestioned and the work funded by the Peter Nelson Leukaemia Research Fund has provided valuable information towards the development of new therapies for patients with AML.

During my tenure as governor of South Australia I was fortunate to travel throughout the state and witness at first hand the extraordinary work graduates from the medical and health spheres were undertaking which was of benefit to all South Australians.

There is a vast array of opportunities available in the medical disciplines, I urge those graduating today to pursue careers in the fields that they are passionate about.

Graduates: congratulations on your achievements to date. They are a reflection of your hard work and dedication as well that of the staff that worked with you.

Whatever journey you choose to pursue in the health sciences, I wish you joy, fulfilment and success.

I am sure we will hear many of your stories of courage, challenges and successes in the years to come.

Thank you again for this prestigious award.