

Australia Day Address

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CATARACT & REFRACTIVE SURGEON, AUSTRALIA DAY AMBASSADOR

Welcome to all of you, who have come together to celebrate this special day. I wish to pay my respects to the Indigenous custodians of this land and to any elders who may be present today.

Thank you for inviting me here to the Country Women's Association headquarters to celebrate Australia Day with you. The CWA and its members have a long and fruitful history of contribution to the development of Australia and I'm pleased and privileged to be part of your celebrations.

I am one of 147 Ambassadors in Victoria adding our voices to today's celebration of Australia. I am delighted to be part of this terrific national program - Australia Day Ambassadors are today participating in celebrations right across Australia, in every State and Territory. I would like to particularly acknowledge the contribution of Woolworths Safeway, which has made the Australia Day 2011 Ambassador program possible.

Also, at this time I want to acknowledge all those volunteers, emergency service workers, police and armed service personnel who

are right now helping those in need who have been affected by recent devastating floods affecting the whole of Eastern Australia. I know we have all been shocked by the terrible loss of life and widespread destruction from the recent floods in Queensland, and more recently in Victoria and New South Wales. Like the Victorian bushfires that took so many lives less than two years ago, we now add names like Grantham and Toowoomba to our list of nature's fatal catastrophes. However, once again we have seen the courage and generosity of thousands of Australians who have stepped up to the challenge of protecting lives and helping to rebuild them once the waters have subsided. When trouble strikes, Australians are at their best: stepping in to lend a hand and doing their bit. It happens in every crisis, and it is a cultural strength that makes this nation great.

My first impulse on receiving the invitation to be an Australia Day Ambassador was to see it as an incredible honour. I'm not a sports hero or media personality - I'm a doctor,

specialising in care and surgery for the eye. And it was gratifying to have medicine recognised this way.

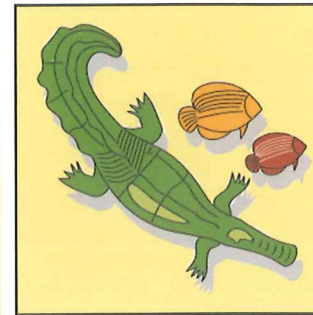
You might understand this if I give you a little of my own background. My grandmother, mother and I were born in Australia and grew up here. But my father came out here from Poland in the 1930's. He was also a doctor, and served in the Second World War with the Australian Army Corps in New Guinea. I was pretty good at the academic side of school, and attended Scotch College nearby. However, my teachers would have said that I was not enthusiastic with school's need for conformity, and I was in frequent detention for wise cracks in class and other foolishness. School sport for me always was a challenge - I wasn't usually picked for team sports as I tend to be self-paced, so today my sporting interests are in skiing and golf. Along the way I picked up spending money doing odd jobs.

One of the first was with some mates and we'd jump Gardiner's Creek into Kooyong Tennis Courts during the Australian Open and collect empty soft-drink bottles to sell back for a half-penny each. At 14 I graduated from this to carrying a tray of drinks and ice-creams to sell between tennis games. My biggest mistake was to leave the tray outside while I went to the toilet and returning to find much of the contents gone. So after a day of hard work in the hot sun I found I still owed the vendor money and came home with nothing.

Between school and uni I went grape picking in Mildura. My mum felt sorry for me and sent me a cheque to buy better food, but I was too independent to accept it so tore it up and sent it back. During the Vietnam War in the 1960's I was drafted, and after my hospital residency I served as a doctor in the Royal Australian Air Force at Amberley in Queensland. On leaving the



L-R Member of Honour Noela MacLeod, State President Helen Christie, Australia Day Ambassador Dr Noel Alpines, Mrs Sylvia Alpines



Then I moved to the Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital as a trainee registrar in eye disease and completed my three year training after being a doctor for six years. As soon as I could, I satisfied that independence drive of mine and set-up my own practice as an eye specialist in Melbourne. This has taken me all over the world both learning and teaching, as I followed my drive to find the very best treatments for my patients. My devoted wife Sylvia often describes it in different terms - such as my obsession.

All these experiences have moulded the Noel Alpines you see before you, just as all your experiences have shaped each of you. And it struck me in preparing these remarks just how uniquely Australian much of this was. I'm particularly conscious of it when I go overseas to speak at conferences. I have developed many friendships in America, Europe and Asia, and it is often through these that I see the contrasts so starkly. For example, they often express amazement at the distance we travel to attend these events. And there is further amazement at the distances we travel in our own country, with the sparse populations we have between departure points and destinations.

All those who visit this wonderful country have said a visit here is to experience tennis, cricket, rugby, sailing, the Opera House, kangaroos, beaches and great scenery such as Ayres Rock/Uluru and the Great Barrier Reef. As a doctor I have to say we have one of the best medical services in the world. However, I have come to realise that what distinguishes Australia and Australians are our shared values. Let me tell you about five of these I see as most important.

This nation and its children have

RAAF I worked back in Melbourne for a year as a general practitioner.

an enterprising spirit. I'm thinking of the arts, entertainment and information technology. And in their own ways Rupert Murdoch, Barry Humphries and even Julian Assange famous for Wikileaks who has stirred the normally closed world of international diplomacy as never before.

It's that can-do spirit: "I can do that. I'll give it a shot, and if I don't succeed the first time I'll pick myself up and do it again." We see that time and again in the arts, sport, science and in so many other fields. For example, in medicine my own research and innovations have spanned 20 years.

Another value is our natural friendliness. Oprah mentioned it when she was here recently. We are very welcoming and tend to readily get along with people from various backgrounds. Our recent tragic cycle of fires and floods in so many parts of Australia exemplifies our community spirit and willingness to help without reward in caring for the less fortunate. This never breaks the Australian spirit. In my own practice I have Greek, English, Chinese, Arabic, Italian, Russian and other nationalities among both my professional and support staff. They all blend in and we have benefited from their diversity. For much of our history we have accepted people from across the world, and we have done a pretty reasonable job of making them feel welcome. In turn our immigrants have made huge contributions to building the nation we are so proud of today. I'm conscious of my family's own diversity and duty to this value, and there would be many here who would share a similar history.

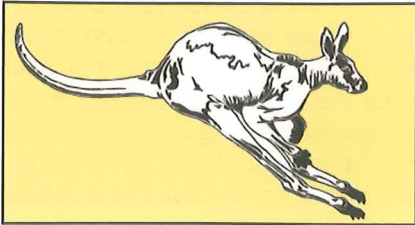
The third value I want to highlight today is fairness - or our desire to be even-handed. Now I have to confess that I sometimes feel we are excessive to the point of being irritating on this one, but if you are going to be excessive in anything you might pursue, then fairness is a great place to do it. My friends in the USA are fixated on freedom and it is a defining value for many people in that country. For us it is fairness, and that probably comes from our history as much as freedom comes from the history of the USA. I'm not arguing

that we are a classless society. We have social divisions, but not nearly so marked as in most other societies. As a nation we salute equality of opportunity and by and large we put our money where our mouth is.

Another value I think that defines much of our culture is inventiveness. Our early farmers had to adopt different practices when European practices failed. Our great distances, the cycles of floods and droughts added to the need for inventiveness. In my own field of medicine, Australia is home to pioneers on so many fronts, including Professors Alan Trounson and Carl Wood with in-vitro fertilisation, Graeme Clark in the bionic ear, McFarlane Burnett in immunology and Victor Chang with modern heart surgery. Australians such as Fred Hollows, Norman Gregg and Ida Mann in their own time were world leaders in Ophthalmology, or care of the eye. Australia also leads the way in research for artificial cornea and laser vision correction. I was initially surprised to find that our leading people here were every bit as good as those internationally. Although our health system is not perfect, it compares very favourably to every other western country.

As Australian innovators, comes the fifth value - we ask questions, and tend not to accept that something is right just because it has always been so. Perhaps that is the larrikin streak coming through or the non-conformist as I have tended to be since my school days. But speaking one's mind as an individual, especially if it conflicts with conventional thinking, is a hallmark of the Australian innovator. In my case some 20 years ago I didn't like the standard approaches to correcting astigmatism, an eye condition which over 70 percent of us have to a different degree, - I felt the treatments as they were, left too much distortion on the eye itself



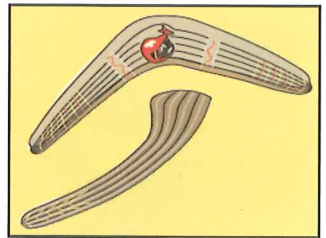


and that as a surgeon it was my responsibility to care for the patient's eye, not harm the vision it perceives. So I asked lots of questions and looked at many potential solutions. Then after several years of hard searching I had what I feel was an epiphany – an insight, which allowed me to better adapt mathematics normally associated with the physical sciences. To some it was heresy of course, because it had never been dealt with this way before. And in some major international centres they didn't think anything worthwhile in research could come from Down-Under – despite our wonderful record in this regard. The so-called

'not invented here' syndrome or NIH exists in many places. Today my scientific advances are widely recognised and used by many leading surgeons around the world, scientific journals and even the FDA in the United States. And this story has been repeated by countless innovators throughout our history where major advances can take 20 years to materialise.

These five sets of values I've mentioned today; enterprising spirit, natural friendliness, fairness, inventiveness and questioning the status quo tend to be taken for granted in this country, but they are fabulous assets and we should celebrate them more. I'm all the more aware of them when I am travelling, because I miss them. And every time when I come home to Australia they arise before me with a new clarity. So today I ask you to consider these values and the other values that make Australia so great. Today we

celebrate our nation, its flag, its history, and its people. It is important to remind ourselves of these five values as we could too readily take them for granted.



That is the power of Australia Day – to consciously remind us what makes this nation great. It helps us take that understanding through the other 364 days of the year to make this nation a better place to work, play and raise our families.

Thank you all for taking the trouble to attend these celebrations, demonstrating your commitment to this nation and the powerful values that drives it.

Happy Australia Day

Left; Pascoe Vale members gather for the official proceedings L-R Beryl Harbour, Jean Aitkin, Past State President Betty Burgess, Norma Thornton

Below: Jessica and Mitchell (Burwood) pose with Rebecca (Keilor Downs)



Elvie Chakley (Pascoe Vale) and Elaine Malley (Bay-side) chat before the function begins

