The occasional address delivered by
Ms Dina Kayali, Business Development Manager, Pfizer
Thursday, 9 March 2017

“Pro-Chancellor, Dr Barry Catchlove AM, Faculty of Pharmacy, Dean Professor Iqbal Ramzan, staff, distinguished guests, graduates, family and friends, I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, upon whose ancestral lands the University of Sydney is built.

It is a testament to your hard work that you sit here today. But what if it is also a testament to the strength and clarity of your inner most thoughts? What if everything that you have ever achieved or experienced in your life so far was due to the very thoughts you have been thinking – the good along with the bad, would that make you more conscious of what you think? Don’t underestimate the power of your inward thoughts.

About 11 years ago (when you were all still in primary school), I too sat where you are sitting right now listening to our graduation speaker. And I had a thought back then, which was that I would like to be in a position somehow one day to be able to come back and have the great honour of delivering the graduation speech and sharing in this pivotal moment in your lives. I don’t really know why I had that specific thought, but I began to wonder what I would need to do with my life to achieve this vision and from then on I often day dreamed about what I would say.

I would go off on a tangent in my head and decide I would speak about my memories of my favourite subject – “Potions” class instead of “Dispensing” (named so by my friends and I who were reading the newly released Harry Potter books at the time), or perhaps, I thought, I would talk about the character building effect that those hard benches in the lecture hall of the main Pharmacy Building had on me
after spending four hours straight sitting there everyday (I hear those benches are still there!). But, then I would quickly remind myself that these details would not be appropriate for a graduation ceremony.

So, 11 years after that first visualisation thought, and although I don’t think I quite figured out what path would lead me to stand in front of you today, I do know that this has reinforced a powerful lesson that has been ever present throughout my life - which is, that your thoughts can create your reality. Your thoughts and your awareness of your thoughts are the only thing that no one else can take away from you. They are what got you here today and are the most powerful thing you own stepping out of the Great Hall this morning, along with that piece of paper you hold between your hands.

A study had actually been conducted about this very thing - 144 basketball players were divided into two groups. Group A physically practiced one-handed shots, whilst Group B only mentally practiced them.

At the end of the two week experiment, the intermediate and experienced players in both groups had improved by nearly the same amount. Now, I don’t know whether this study was sufficiently powered and statistically significant or whether it was double-blind, randomised, placebo controlled etc etc, and I’m certainly not suggesting that you practice triple backflips in your head and then attempt to execute them, but I think you can see the point.

My first encounter with this realisation was as a young girl. I was born in Kuwait to parents of Palestinian origin. My dad had experienced the hardships of being displaced during wartime. Both were hard working and ambitious and wanted freedom, opportunity and security for their daughters. It wasn’t long before we narrowly dodged the infamous Saddam Hussain’s Gulf War and settled permanently in Australia. But it was during these early years of my life in the Middle East that I began to observe my surroundings - It was a male dominated environment and working women were few, and access to innovations and healthcare was not available to all, and with my Palestinian family network scattered around the world, I knew that freedom of travel was a necessity.

My inner thoughts began to crystalise into a strong vision, and by the time I was midway through primary school I was clear on my ambition of wanting to be able to contribute to the world by working in a corporate role within the healthcare industry that was connected to a global network allowing me the freedom to travel. I held onto this vision tightly, even going down to the detail of the heels I would wear and the bag I would drag behind me as I would board my millionth flight to that very important meeting.

Fast forward to today and these thoughts have become a reality. My job as Business Development Manager at Pfizer entails assessing our overall company strategy and direction and seeking opportunities to grow the business.

This involves company strategic planning and development, negotiation, relationship building and strategic alliance formation with other companies and partners for in-licensing products and molecules, acquisitions, product development, and other joint ventures and partnerships.
My 10 years working in the industry has already taken me to many different parts of the world - Egypt, Croatia, Malaysia, Cambodia, United Arab Emirates, Jordan, France, Italy, Austria, America, New Zealand, Vietnam, Korea and Spain. All of this whilst in those heels I envisaged!

Certainly, I have found myself in my dream job. The path to achieve this vision however, was not always a smooth one. When I left Canberra after high school to study pharmacy here in Sydney I was used to being a straight A student. I was shocked and quickly humbled when I became one small fish in the sea of my pharmacy student colleagues.

I had not done biology at all throughout high school, and, despite it having been a pre-requisite for pharmacy’s first year, in my blind overconfidence I did not heed the advice to at least take the bridging class. I learnt the hard way and had to work twice as hard as most of my peers to play catch up. And then in the summer break following my first year at pharmacy school, life threw me a bit of a curve ball.

I was back at home with my family in Canberra when news broke of a nearby bushfire that was threatening our suburb. But the news did not break early enough, and so without much warning, we found ourselves trapped in our house surrounded by smoke and flames. I’ll never forget that moment huddled in a circle with my parents and sisters, cornered, deciding on what we should do, or even if there was anything that we could do – my only thought was “I’m not ready to die yet, I have not yet experienced much in life, nor have I given anything back into the world”.

I remind myself of this thought every time I find myself in challenging situations – either there is a unique experience for me to have, or my role is to share something positive to help change that situation and make an impact. This helps bring meaning to all aspects of my life.

We found an opening between the fireballs and ran down our street until we were taken to a crisis centre. More than 400 homes were destroyed in those 2003 summer bushfires, including ours. We lost everything and had to re-build our lives. I came to appreciate the saying “knowledge is power”, because when you have nothing, it really is.

Sometimes I wonder whether that experience was the only thing that helped me through that tough second year of pharmacy, where I often felt close to quitting under the intensity of the workload.

It was in my final year that I remember walking the hall in the Pharmacy Building where most of our fourth year subjects were held, my friends and I were discussing what we would like to pursue in our careers post graduation.

One friend said she would like to be a hospital pharmacist, two said they wanted to use the degree to become medical doctors, and I was sticking firmly to my vision as a pharmaceutical industry executive.

For one of the friends who wanted to be a medical doctor, she was struggling in this tough pharmacy degree and ended up having to stay on an additional year to complete it, for the friend wanting to be a hospital pharmacist, graduate positions were very limited and highly contested and she had had no work placement in the field prior.
For me, I had no industry connections and would face pharmaceutical industry recruitment agencies telling me that I could not enter the industry without industry experience and even refusing to have me on their books until such time that I did.

This seemed like a big catch 22 to me, and I did scratch my head many times over that one! But guess what, each one of our visions has come true. Illustrating not only the power of our thoughts, but also the power that that piece of paper in your hands today represents – for you as pharmacy graduates especially.

What your unique pharmacy degree tells the world is that you CAN survive on only half an hours sleep and a can of Red Bull and pass your pharmacology and pharmacokinetics exams, you can whip up a coal tar ointment and NOT stain your clothes, but most importantly, that you CAN be leaders and role models in the healthcare environment, you have the authority now and the credentials to be innovative and to see your ideas through to profound and tangible solutions for society.

So, it’s your turn now to think about what you wish to visualise for your lives ahead. As you do this, I urge you to remember the words of the Greek philosopher, Plutarch, who stated that what we achieve inwardly will change our outer reality. So, it’s not only your own lives that you change with your thoughts and visions, but also consider the impact this will have on others and the rest of the world. I think we all as pharmacists are in a privileged position in society where we are seen as positive contributors. Don’t rely on this reputation alone, be active in always questioning and thinking about decisions in the pursuit of what is best.

So, it wasn’t long after I graduated that I got my big break, my first industry role, which came in the form of a medical sales representative in Dubai. I was actually only in Dubai on an extended holiday with my family, but when I heard about the role, I knew I had to apply.

I turned up for my first ever proper interview of my life and was told I had to give a presentation on the spot with only 5 minutes to prepare, on any topic at all. Naturally, I panicked, and out of every single thing in the whole wide world that I could have possibly talked about, I for some reason decided to talk about the topic of constipation! It must have been the true pharmacist in me coming out!

I got the job and although it was gruelling at times selling from hospital to hospital and doctor to doctor in blistering 45-degree heat, with my car as my office, it did provide a strong foundation and entry into the pharmaceutical industry.

And so began my industry career journey working in a number of multinational companies, and in various roles from sales, medical affairs, marketing, brand management, business development, being at the forefront of healthcare landscape shaping through the introduction of biosimilars, riding a camel around the pyramids in Egypt whilst attending product training, visiting a biosimilar manufacturing site in Zagreb, sipping soju with business partners in South Korea, and rowing down the Charles River whilst attending a company sponsored course at Harvard University.
I hope you can see from these examples that it’s not always just the big things in life that count, and you should quit waiting for big things to happen. It’s more about joining the dots and stringing all the little things that happen together. And it’s more about how you connect these dots in your life that will make a difference to your success, as well as taking on challenges with open arms, having a positive attitude, and embracing uncertainties without pushing back on change.

And remembering that to get “lucky” you often need to keep persisting. And that’s why I don’t like to call it luck, but rather opportunity meeting a prepared mind.

For the many women in the room, stop feeling self-conscious and like an imposter in the workplace. This is a mindset which is synonymous with high achievers and is marked by an inability to internalise their accomplishments. This has been found to be pronounced in women and there is no better time than now to overcome this. Coincidentally, yesterday was International Women’s Day (8 March), which is a great time to reflect and celebrate the successes of women like yourselves around the world. You will naturally be role models to many stepping out of the Great Hall today, so don’t be afraid to rise up to the occasion and act like the leaders that you are on day one.

I would now like to stop and ask you all to look at your peer next to you. Many of you have earned a higher degree – PHD, MPhil, Honors – well done, this is a great achievement which is highly valued, celebrated, and encouraged in the workforce. Your independently driven research skills demonstrate discipline and drive and you are the future leaders of academia.

For all of you graduates today, you are intelligent and talented individuals to be sitting in those seats in the first place. Definitely things to be proud of, but I urge you to think about what makes you different and what will set you apart. Something I have come to realise time and time again in the workplace is that talent and intelligence alone will only get you so far. What will get you so much further however are all things that require zero talent, such as attitude, determination, resilience, being responsive, being open to feedback, taking initiative, but more importantly is your clarity of future vision.

Surprisingly, one of the hardest things I have found in life so far is living life according to your own expectations, rather than of those around you. These next few years after graduation are the opportune time for you to figure this out. Seek out a meaningful life with the degree and tools you have based on your expectations of what this would be for you, hold that thought and vision clearly, let it be at the forefront of your daily lives, and then approach each day with a positive attitude, determination, openness and initiative and I guarantee you you will succeed and achieve great things. Thank you.”