

Dr Tom Insel/Wallace Wurth Lecture, vote of thanks by Professor Ian Jacobs, UNSW, 19 September 2016

Thank you, Dr Insel.

Tonight you've opened new windows onto a subject that's preoccupying health workers, politicians, educators and community leaders around the world: it's no exaggeration to say we're experiencing an epidemic in mental health disorders.

It's also a subject that, until quite recently, was often kept behind *closed* windows and doors, so that those with mental health disorders found themselves living inside a parallel universe, afraid to discuss their problems and fearful of losing friends and relationships and their jobs. I'm sure many of us here tonight know of family and friends who've been in that space, and have suffered that stigma - a journey that too frequently has resulted in severe depression, and - tragically, in many cases - suicide.

In any single year, we know that one in five adult Australians, and one in seven children aged from four to 17, will experience some form of mental illness. We know that one in three Australians will have a mental illness in their lifetime. We know that more than 2,000 Australians take their own lives every year. Suicide is the most common cause of death in men under 45. These figures, shocking as they are, are not unique to Australia - they're reflected in most Western societies. And in most large institutions, including our own, UNSW Sydney.

We have 6,000 staff and over 50,000 students - which makes this not only a major higher education campus, but also a very human place. If you consider a regional city with that many people, say Rockhampton or Orange, imagine the range of mental health issues you'd confront. Some of the problems we encounter here, of course, reflect a bias towards youth; many of our students are away from home for the first time, many indeed away from their home countries, they're having an active social life, they're trying to make career decisions, they're entering relationships, and they're pushing themselves hard to do well in exams.

Not everyone finds that easy to handle. And some find it very tough going.

Mental health is something we take very seriously here at UNSW - both in our direct assistance programs, and in our teaching and research. For students and staff we have in place a wide range of programs aimed at identifying and helping those at risk. Our UNSW Counselling and Psychological Services, CAPS, offers students free, confidential counselling and self-help resources that promote wellbeing, and help them adjust to university life. In October each year we mark Mental Health Month with innovative and accessible on-campus events - many organised by Student Minds, our student-led outreach program.

On the academic side, our School of Psychiatry is judged the pre-eminent psychiatric research department in the country, with four Scientia Professors and a reputation for excellence. The School has just established the Australian Mental Health Prize for the most outstanding contribution to the promotion of mental health, or the prevention/treatment of mental illness, and the inaugural winner will be announced in December.

Also based in our Medicine Faculty is our Centre for Healthy Brain Ageing, CHEBA, led by two outstanding researchers, Scientia Professors Perminder Sachdev and Henry Brodaty – and the Mindgardens Neurosciences Project, proposed as the nation’s first comprehensive brain disorders centre - a cross-faculty, ‘one-stop shop’ for patients and referring clinicians focusing on depression; drugs and alcohol; behavioural change and the developing brain; dementia; healthy ageing; and neurodegenerative disorders.

And we have the Black Dog Institute, now in its 15th year of keeping the proverbial ‘black dog’ of depression at bay - a global pioneer in the identification, prevention and treatment of mental illness, and promotion of well-being. I know they’re doing some remarkable things with their Digital Dog program, including the My Compass app that lets people track their own mental health, particularly in rural and remote areas of Australia where services are limited, and their iBobby app - aimed at saving young Indigenous lives - which delivers treatment-based therapy in a culturally relevant way.

In our UNSW Faculty of Science, the School of Psychology is engaging directly with one of the great issues of our time: the refugee crisis, with some 50 million refugees now adrift in the world and 40-percent of them children, many suffering elevated rates of mental health problems caused by torture, prolonged persecution, exposure to atrocities, danger in fleeing their homelands, and subsequent detention. The School is researching their problems and, with that, developing better means of intervention that can impact global practice.

The Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences is focusing on the key social triggers of poverty, injustice and inequality. Its Social Policy Research Centre is generating some real change for individual and communities, especially in young people aged 12 to 25. Its investigations into cyberbullying, for example, led to the introduction last year of the *Enhancing Online Safety for Children Act*, and its review of housing and accommodation support in New South Wales showed how people could lead more independent lives while overcoming the debilitating effects of mental illness.

In our Faculty of Art and Design, too, some fascinating work is going on - using multidisciplinary teams with technologies such as immersive visualisation, to produce powerful renderings of, for example, the effects of a stroke on the human brain. Art & Design’s Creative Robotics Lab is exploring human-robot interaction, and how that might ultimately help autistic children, or sufferers of anxiety, dementia and Alzheimer’s.

In addition to this, our researchers are actively engaged with others across Australia and around the world. Last year we established a working collaboration with the University of Sydney to maximise the impact of our two institutions’ outstanding research in mental health, addiction and neuroscience - and to go all-out for major breakthroughs. All this conforms with our 2025 Strategy to make UNSW a world-leading centre of innovative research with real-world applications.

Central to *everything* of course is that most amazing computer, the human brain. Using technology to understand better how the brain works - how it allows us to record, store, process and utilise vast quantities of information at incredible speeds - is a major part of understanding how also we might one day conquer mental disorders. Increasingly that means it’s a job not only for medical practitioners and social scientists, but also for engineers and software developers.

These are partnerships that will deliver real breakthroughs, and tonight Tom Insel has advanced considerably our understanding of that nexus between technology and mental health - and, within that too, the possibilities of more individualised care, not only to save lives but also to make troubled lives better again. His talk has taken us out to the edge, to the verge of extraordinary developments in a field of vital interest to every one of us.

Thank you.

Professor Ian Jacobs is President and Vice-Chancellor of UNSW Sydney.