

Ceremony 5
Academic Oration
Thursday 24 November 2011 at 1630hrs
JESUITS' CHURCH – VALLETTA

Prof. Kevin Cassar
Department of Surgery
Faculty of Medicine and Surgery

“All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing”.

And it seems that there is a terrible dearth of good men, (and women), judging by the daily news items. At both national and international level, the news is dominated by evil - mass murder in Libya, suicide bombings in Iraq and Afghanistan, indiscriminate killing in Norway, abuse of children and adolescents by members of the clergy in various countries including ours, repression and murder in Syria, imprisonment of doctors in Bahrain, uncontrolled greed leading to collapse of the financial markets, bribes being accepted from convicted drug traffickers by senior members of the judiciary and on and on it goes. Of course these atrocious and criminal acts are easily recognisable for what they are. We are quick to denounce these acts of inhumanity and those who commit them.

At the same time however we are surrounded by acts of lesser evil that we not only fail to denounce but even glorify. We live in a world where dishonesty, disloyalty, bad behaviour and vulgarity are applauded and rewarded. Those who shout loudest are those who are heard and idolised. We see the same people being interviewed and photographed, their slightest comment reported and reproduced – their claim to fame being a public act of disloyalty to their group or political party, a public betrayal of their colleagues or the principles they previously held. We are constantly bombarded with the faces of celebrities whose behaviour is at best atrocious and at worst criminal and who are presented as the role models we should emulate. It seems that being vulgar, abusive and offensive is a guarantee to success.

The media is overflowing with bloggers, columnists and contributors whose readership is directly proportional to the offensiveness and vulgarity of their columns. Racism and hatred are continuously spewed out and some extreme views appear to have become main stream. Some argue that we should not intervene to save the lives of would be immigrants at sea for narrow national interests, professional unions object to the treatment of severely injured patients from neighbouring war zones in our country, others reason that we should still deal with despotic dictators who flagrantly disrespect human rights and oppress their own people as long as we will benefit financially.

Plagiarism is common place and those caught seem not only to lack the good sense and grace to admit it and hide away in shame but continue to occupy positions of authority and responsibility. Dishonesty and shamelessness are encouraged and promoted.

In our professional lives we witness the same traits being commended. In the field of research and publications, undeserving authoritative figures exert pressure to be included in the list of authors without justification. The growing publication list then leads to promotion and career advancement. Research results are fabricated or negative results withheld to appease the funding companies, and to avoid denting profit margins of those same companies. Greed distorts clinical judgement and decision making – expensive and possibly risky investigations and treatments are recommended to vulnerable patients who do not require them but who can pay for them. Disparaging remarks about colleagues are accepted as an easy way of gaining unfair advantage and curry favour.

Basic courtesy and politeness also seem to be in short supply. Tuning in to some of the local radio or television stations provides large doses of rudeness, intolerance, foul language, deception and disrespect. The large number of channels and the huge amount of unfilled air- time is an open invitation for standards to be dragged down to the basest levels. Freedom of expression is no longer a hard-earned right to be cherished but an opportunity for unregulated distortion of facts and personal offence. Journalists use their privileged position to distort the truth and misrepresent the facts for political advantage or personal success.

In the face of these realities what is the role of the University graduate? I looked up the University of Malta website to find out what the ideals of this University are and what type of graduates it is aiming to produce. I found out that the degree courses at the University are “designed to produce highly qualified professionals, with experience of research, who will play key roles in industry, commerce and public affairs in general”.

Clearly these are commendable aims but not terribly ambitious. What we seem to be missing in the description of what our University education is about is the idealism that should be instilled into every single graduate, the idealism that we require to change the world we live in for the better. Our university should aim to produce leaders who will have the courage to stand up to injustice, dishonesty and evil - leaders who will demonstrate honesty, integrity, loyalty, fairness, courtesy and humanity, respect and tolerance.

We desperately need a new breed of professionals who are not only highly competent in their chosen field but who recognise the true and lasting rewards of honesty and integrity. We need graduates whose courage in their pursuit of equity and honesty will shame their senior colleagues into emulating their behaviour. We need you to set a new standard of civility and fairness that will bring decency into our behaviour and into our lives and trust back in our institutions. We hope that the driving principles of the new generation of graduates will not be personal success and wealth at all costs but the desire for fairness

and justice. I would like to see pragmatism being overrun by idealism. And if idealism is not championed by the new graduate who can it be championed by?

Of course this is a tall order for our new graduates. Does the university have any role in promoting and developing these high standards of professional behaviour in its graduates? The university already has clear guidelines on plagiarism and collusion issued for students and academics. The document makes it clear that academic fraud and dishonesty is taken very seriously and that firm punitive measures, including expulsion from the University and even revocation of a degree already awarded, will be taken. While threats of punishment can control fraud and academic dishonesty, much more is required to change attitudes and behaviour and develop true leaders.

The most effective way to change someone else's behaviour is to modify one's own. In the case of our university changing its own behaviour implies appointing academic staff not only based on their academic abilities but also on high standards of professional behaviour. By providing our students with role models who maintain the highest ethical and professional standards we can start to ensure that our graduates themselves recognise that nothing less is expected of them, both during their student years and more importantly during their professional life. Judging standards of good behaviour however is no easy task. How will the University manage to recruit only staff of the highest integrity and professional behaviour? Established practices for recruitment such as references are not of much help. Various institutions have altered the type of references requested. Instead of allowing white space for a referee to write freely about the applicant, direct questions about the various aspects of the person specifications are posed. Amongst those specifications, professional behaviour and integrity should feature prominently and due weight should be given to those attributes in the selection process.

For this to work effectively however we are still dependent on the integrity and honesty of the referees. Referees are usually selected by the applicants themselves. Should and could the employer, in this case the University, decide on who provides references? 360 degree assessment or multi-source feedback has been introduced at various levels in an attempt to obtain a more complete picture of the applicant's behaviour rather than just their academic skills. This involves several assessors, including peers, senior and junior staff, clients and other people who interact directly with the applicant, being asked their opinion about the applicant's professional behaviour and not just about their competence. This and other tools could be explored in the recruitment process to ensure that appointed academic staff are not only the best academics but also the most exemplary.

It is now being recognised that high standards of professional behaviour need to be maintained even by students, particularly those who are pursuing medical, dental, pharmaceutical or paramedical degrees. Both the UK General Medical Council and the Medical Council of Malta have issued guidance for students on professional behaviour and fitness to practise. The rationale behind the development of this guidance was that

these students have certain privileges and responsibilities which are different from those of other students and as a result different standards of professional behaviour are expected of them. The General Medical Council's document goes further and recommends that students who are unable to develop professional behaviour that is safe for patients should not be allowed to graduate in their field. It also makes clear that even their behaviour outside of the clinical environment, including their personal lives, may have an impact on fitness to practise. What this implies is that even in the student years the behaviour of students must justify the trust the public places in the respective profession. This sends out the clear message to trainee doctors, dentists and pharmacists that it is no longer sufficient simply to pass academic and clinical examinations to graduate. It is also crucial that these students demonstrate that they are honest, trustworthy and act with integrity.

In an ideal world of course students recruited into medicine, dentistry, pharmacy and other professions allied to health have been so well selected that none will demonstrate improper or unprofessional behaviour. This leads to questions about whether our current selection processes into university courses, particularly those mentioned, are fit for purpose. Is a selection process based solely on academic qualifications still adequate for today's requirements? Is it time for us to introduce clinical aptitude tests, as have other universities, in addition to academic requirements to the selection process? I would suggest that an assessment of an individual's attitudes and professional behaviour should form some part of the selection process into these courses. It is crucial that prospective students recognise as early as possible that what makes a good doctor, dentist, pharmacist or a good allied healthcare professional is not simply academic skills but honesty and integrity. And this message needs to continue to be relayed throughout the student years, throughout postgraduate training years and throughout the entire career of these professionals. Our university is in an ideal position to contribute to the changes required to foster a culture where professional behaviour and the right attitude count as much as, if not more than, academic distinction. From entry criteria, to requirements for progression, through to successful qualification, to recruitment into academic posts and promotion up the ranks, our university is morally obliged to take positive and active steps to ensure that the highest standards of professional behaviour are achieved and maintained.

Our country has invested heavily in your education. Our country is proud to see you graduate from our university today. But our country also expects a return on its investment. The return that we all expect is that the mental abilities, attitudes and professional integrity that you will display in your professional and personal life will dispel the cynicism and evil that we witness around us. What we expect is that throughout your life you will demonstrate true leadership and make the right choices even at the cost of personal hardship. May you be the good men and women who will act to defeat evil.