

USAP Dinner, October 21, 2014

Prof Richard I. Christopherson

Response to the toast to the University

I want to thank Chris on behalf of the University for his kind words, I completely agree with his comments about the University. A combination of academic excellence and tradition is hard to beat. In the current Australian Research Rankings, the University of Sydney ranks 60th on the world list, third in Australia behind the University of Melbourne (33) and the ANU (45). I have worked at all 3 Universities, and Sydney is the best. I always wonder about the criteria used to calculate rankings, I would like to see a ranking of Universities based just upon research excellence. If we include the Research Institutes and Teaching Hospitals linked to USyd, then we have a 'Research Powerhouse' that has both breadth and depth and could achieve almost anything.

As members of academic staff, we have spent decades at USyd working with each other, in my case almost 29 years. During that time, there have been opportunities to socialise, there used to be a Christmas Party for Professors in the

Main Quad, and the Faculty of Medicine used to have retreats at the Fairmont resort at Leura, the Novotel at Wollongong, or the Crown Plaza at Terrigal. These gatherings have stopped, probably due to financial constraints, but we still have groups like USAP that bring us together.

In 1987, I organised a Tennis Group with Gerry Wake and Basil Roufogalis at the University that has run ever since. If you do the calculation, I must have played  $28 \times 48$  (1,344) matches over this period with staff and students from across the University. One of our members is the current President of USAP, Les Copeland. I have found that one invariably becomes friends with all the other players in the Tennis Group, the Chinese called this 'ping-pong diplomacy'. This aspect of human behaviour is certainly not 'the Stockholm Syndrome'. The 4 grassed squares in the Main Quadrangle were lawn tennis courts until the 1920s; I doubt that the University would want to have the nets and white lines now. It's interesting to note that a very old tennis ball was found wedged into the stonework in the Main Quad, placed there by a previous generation of tennis players.

A major constraint to our research at the University of Sydney is the availability of funds. For the University of Queensland, there has been a tennis connection through the Australian player, Ken Fletcher, and an American benefactor, Chuck Feeney. Fletcher won the US Open Tennis doubles title with John Newcombe in 1963. Through the friendship between Fletcher and Feeney, \$150M has been donated to support medical research in Queensland, including vaccines for human papilloma virus and tuberculosis at the Translational Research Institute, currently headed by Prof Ian Frazer. Chuck Feeney is giving away his fortune of \$6B through the Atlantic Foundation.

The CRC for Space Environment Management at the ANU has recently received a grant for \$150M from multiple sources to build a centre at the Mt Stromlo Observatory to fight the emerging problem of space junk. Apparently, there are more than 300,000 items in earth orbit travelling at speeds of 17,500 mph that could initiate a catastrophic avalanche of collisions, quickly destroying all satellites. The plan is to zap the debris with lasers using the momentum of the photons to push the junk from their orbits so that they fall back into the atmosphere. I consulted Iver Cairns, our

Professor of Space Physics, about this just to make sure the details were correct. I should add that Iver is the most improved player in the Tennis Group for this year.

In 2013, the University of Sydney received a donation of \$20.6M, the sale price for the Picasso painting 'Jeune fille endormie' ('Sleeping beauty', 1935). Marie-Therese Walter was one of Picasso's greatest muses, she was 17 and he was 45. Picasso introduced himself to her outside the Galeries Lafayette in Paris and offered to paint her. She had not heard of Picasso but was flattered. Marie was the mistress and model for Picasso from 1927 to 1935, and the mother of his daughter, Maya, born in 1935. 'Jeune fille endormie' shows Marie in glowing colours sleeping on her arms, tightly focused on the sleeper's head.

The funds from this painting have been used by the University to establish endowed 'Picasso Chairs' for scientific research at the Charles Perkins Centre. We need more donations like this, perhaps an order of magnitude higher to match the generosity of Chuck Feeney.

The current trend at the University seems to be to identify important applied problems to solve, and then gather the skill set of academics to come up with a solution. There is some merit in this approach, but as an academic University, we shouldn't venture too far from the fundamentals of our disciplines. Basic research is the most challenging and has brought many rewards in the past.

In the future, a major challenge for medical researchers at the University of Sydney will be to gain NHMRC grants in competition with full-time researchers at the Institutes. One solution to this problem would be to provide separate funds for University-based research, and the Institutes. The time and effort that goes into preparing an application for a nationally Competitive grant is huge, and is a significant collective drain on the University system for those investigators who are unsuccessful. A 2-page Expression of Interest with a cull of 70% would minimise the amount of wasted effort. In addition, a 6-month cycle for grant applications would provide more flexibility than the current 12-month cycle. These comments relate to NHMRC grants, where I served recently on the Grants Review Panel for

Cancer, but could equally apply to arrangements for ARC grants.

Having said that we work in an imperfect system, I have been very fortunate in my research career, and in the 5 universities at which I have worked.

Thank you.