

ROYAL AUSTRALASIAN COLLEGE OF SURGEONS,
MELBOURNE - LAYING OF FOUNDATION STONE,
6TH MARCH, 1964

Speech by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. Sir Robert Menzies

Mr. President, My Lord, My Lord Mayor and Ladies and Gentlemen :

I put a prudent question to the President just now, I said: "Do I lay this stone first and speak afterwards?" and he said: "Speak first". And I hope if I forget to lay this stone, he will remind me.

As a matter of fact, you know, I am a masquerader on an occasion of this kind. Here I am all done up as a surgeon. Two days ago, I took out three Members of Parliament and had them sworn as Ministers and I didn't know which of my many ties I ought to wear on that occasion, but I found that the one which was the cleanest and most presentable was the tie of the Royal College of Gynaecologists and Obstetricians (Laughter) and I am very distinguished in that field. So I put on that tie and the Governor-General who doesn't miss much, had a look at me afterwards and said, "What tie is that you are wearing?" I said, "Sir, I am a gynaecologist and obstetrician (Laughter) and nobody ought to know it better than you do because I have just given birth to three new Ministers" (Laughter)

I am also a physician, I am an architect - though sadly out of date in my architectural views. In fact there are very few things that you can name that I am not one of them in a fraudulent sense; when they mean there is no merit in this matter, they always say causa honoris and, causa honoris, I am a most versatile character, but in reality I know nothing about these things. But I do know that when I read through the story of this College, beginning as recently as 1926, I found this the most exciting story, I think, that any Australian could read. A wonderful story. This country has for many, many years enjoyed a world reputation in the field of surgery, but it was only as recently as 1926 that this College was established, later to become the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, now holding its head up in any company in the world, now with its fellowships, honoured and respected and valued all over the world. This is a wonderful story to be able to tell after thirtyseven or thirtyeight years, and it marks two things, one of them being the enormous development of surgery in the modern world.

Occasionally, in an idle moment, I have a look at Sam Pepys' diary or one of those earnest records or not so earnest records about the tail end of the seventeenth century and there are one or two descriptions of operations. It couldn't have been much fun, I think, for the patient in those days before anaesthetics, before antiseptic or aseptic surgery. Not much fun, except for one thing and that was that to induce a species of anaesthesia in the patient, liberal applications of grog were made and so the patient, in a state of affairs that would never recommend itself to any modern temperance body, became almost unconscious to the villainies that were being perpetrated on him. Well, that's of course before your time and before my time.

All I know is that probably in the last fifty, sixty, seventy years the developments in the art and science of surgery in the world have been phenomenal. Indeed it is worthwhile people recalling occasionally that although we do manage to destroy life on a very great scale in the modern world, you surgeons have

managed to preserve life, to sustain life to the most astonishing degree, and all this is due to learning, constant study, a constant willingness to learn new techniques and a devotion to the task which excludes, I am perfectly certain, at the time of operation, all other considerations.

I don't mind saying to you as a man with two professions - the profession of the law and the profession of politics - that I envy you the profession that you pursue. This is, in the highest sense of the world, a constructive occupation. But if people had not founded this College, if they had not taken steps to encourage post-graduate work, further work, expert lectures, expert experimentation and teaching and thought, surgery would have tended to stand still except for what might be read in the documents proceeding from some other countries. The great thing about this College, the marvellous thing - I think about it every time I drive past it when I come into Melbourne - is that it represents the consciousness in practical terms of the need constantly to learn more, to know more at the end of one day than one knew at the end of the previous day, to be willing to learn, to be willing to be bold. There is a lot of courage, I always think, required in the art of the surgeon. A man who is timid, a man who says, "No, I'll play safe," might get by, but he will never add to the sum of surgical knowledge. Many lives that would have been lost if every surgeon had played safe, have been rescued because many decided that courage should be added to skill and that between the two of them, wonderful results might be attained.

And so it is not merely a matter of recalling what has happened in the field of surgery on the world scene; today is an opportunity to recall with pride what has happened in this part of the world, in Australia and in New Zealand, to recall the great men, the imaginative men who established the College, and the couple of generations of people who understood that they must go on and on and learn to become more and more competent, not simply because this would be of some advantage to them. We all have some advantages from whatever we do in a material sense, but the driving force in this College has been the widening of the boundaries of knowledge, the raising of the standards of surgical skill, the benefit of the people as a whole.

And that is why, in whatever capacity I may masquerade myself today, I would like to say before I lay the foundation stone that as a Prime Minister who as has just been said, performed a successful operation not very long ago, as a Prime Minister who has been saddled with the responsibilities of Government in this country for a long, long time, I would think myself rather odd if I didn't say that while occasionally in my simple vanity I may be tempted to think that I have done something useful or something good, today I am perfectly certain that I am addressing, particularly in the professional sense here today, men who, for themselves and for those who come after them, are doing work about which nobody can argue. This is constructive work, not as well known as the work of people who are in the headlines but very frequently immeasurably more important. And so, as the Head of the Government, I say how grateful I am to you, Sir, for having invited me to come here, how proud I am to have the opportunity of being associated with this great development and how confident I am that just as you now look back on fairly modest beginnings, and I admit that price of £13,000 made me a little green with envy (I don't think we will be able to build a new Parliament House with that) but just as you look back on these modest beginnings, so your sons and grandsons will look back on this with all its extensions as a modest beginning because year after year, generation after generation, this work will go on.

I thank you, I congratulate you and I will now go across and hope when I pull the right string or handle the right instrument - I ought to have a ward sister with me, I think - that I may declare the stone well and truly laid.
