

‘We Have a Moral Obligation’

Professor Jennifer Martin, RACP President

2024 RACP Congress: President’s Dinner

Introduction

- Fellows and trainees of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians
- Distinguished guests from the United Kingdom, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and New Zealand [*Note: Please add other nations represented at the Gala.*]
- Colleagues, families, and guests of Members of the College

I acknowledge the Gadigal people as the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathered – and pay my respects to their Elders, past and present.

I also acknowledge any other Elders with us today.

Bear with me, but I want to go off on a slight tangent and speak briefly about philosopher **Immanuel Kant**, ... linguist and activist **Noam Chomsky** ... and actor **Will Smith**.

I’ll start with **Will Smith**.

If you have teenaged children, you probably remember the scandal of the 2022 Oscars ceremony.

That was the Oscars when comedian **Chris Rock** made a bad-taste joke about actor **Jada Pinkett Smith**’s alopecia – and her husband, **Will Smith**, reacted by walking on stage and slapping **Rock**.

Professor **William Davies** – a sociologist and political economist from the University of London – made an interesting observation about the aftermath of that slap in a lecture for the *London Review of Books*.

Davies said:

‘For several days afterwards, countless commentators, celebrities and social media users sought to distinguish themselves by their reaction to “the slap”. Inevitably, those reactions provoked further reactions, as debate turned to the merits of the positions taken, and suspicion descended on those who hadn’t yet reacted at all ... The amount of global attention “slapgate” sucked up in the weeks after the ceremony was considerable.’

Davies called this phenomenon a ‘reaction chain’.

In a reaction chain, the social media pile on overshadows or becomes more important than the initial incident – and, in this hurricane of accusation, feelings often override fact.

Like **Davies**, I’m more interested in what the reaction to **Will Smith’s** slap tells us about our society than the slap itself.

One of the takeaways from the slap is that the algorithms of social media are turbo-charging reaction chains and inflaming public debate – driving us to cancel rather than listen, rush to accuse rather than seek to understand, and believe conspiracies more than realities.

We saw this kind of inflamed public debate during the lockdown years of the pandemic.

Conspiracies ran riot.

The sovereign citizen movement grew exponentially.

And many physicians found themselves on the frontline – if not the firing line – trying to fight fallacy with fact.

Without a doubt the best antidote to COVID-19 reaction chains were the medical experts who fronted hundreds of media conferences and gave hundreds of one-on-one media interviews. Our NZ and Australian clinical pharmacologists spent countless hours discussing publicly, and with funding bodies, ethics committees and Senate committees and Government, the futility of public money funding hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin trials – as the science and particularly the pharmacology wasn't there. So much wasted money, opportunity cost and patient morbidity.

All of which reminds me of something **Noam Chomsky** said about the Internet in 1994, just before the dot-com boom took off.

Chomsky – who is no fan of corporate media – said:

‘Direct face-to-face contact is an extremely important part of human life. ... You just have a different relationship to somebody when you're looking at them than you do when you're punching away at a keyboard ...

‘I suspect that extending that form of abstract and remote relationship, instead of direct, personal contact, is going to have unpleasant effects on what people are like. It will diminish their humanity.’

Among other things, what **Chomsky** was warning against thirty years ago was reaction chains.

Chomsky could not foresee Will Smith’s slap, but he knew human nature and behaviour.

It is clear I am a fan of Noam Chomsky, his ability to understand subtle and twisted messaging and media and to use his voice for good, but you might ask what does all of this have to do with our profession?

Our College?

This Congress?

The answer is nothing – and everything.

Nothing – because our training and teaching and research and clinical work is all about medical science rather than online science fictions.

Everything – because the communities and people we serve are surrounded by, and increasingly influenced by, reaction chains, fueled by miscommunication in the media. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* is Chomsky showing the media are

effective and powerful ideological institutions that carry out a system supportive propaganda function, by reliance on market forces, internalized assumptions, and self-censorship, and without overt coercion.

My point is this: conflict-driven narratives are raising the temperature of our times. And, to counter false narratives, we need to be aware of the forces driving those narratives, be analytical, understand them and rise to a higher level, that backed by science and critical thought and challenged, not silenced by peers.

Our profession and our College – together with forums such as this Congress, where we come together and meet face-to-face – are important bulwarks against the contagious spread of medical falsehood ...

... and platforms for the promotion of better health practices, optimal use of public health money and better health outcomes.

After all, without the countervailing influence of medical experts, the media vacuum will be filled by fear.

As **Davies** said in his lecture:

‘Much of the anxiety promoted by today’s reaction economy consists in the possibility that, in our desperate hunt for feedback and our need to give feedback to others, we allow ourselves to be steered in directions we did not consent to, and may not wish to go ... We are drawn towards controversy, absurd public spectacles, endless mutating memes, trolling, etc.’

As physicians, we have a moral obligation, then, to invest in institutions and forums that promote and protect evidence-based progress.

I'm not talking about towing the line, by the way.

I'm not talking about just going along with the prevailing or comfortable wisdom.

I am talking about taking the time to get engaged and informed about the scientific and ethical dilemmas we face – and, if necessary, having the backbone to prosecute an informed opinion.

We should do as **Kant** – one of the leading intellectuals of the eighteenth century – said 'dare to know'.

We should have the courage to use our own reason because, as **Kant** said, that 'is the motto of the Enlightenment'.

We should do all of that – and more – not because we want to win an argument on Twitter but because we are duty-bound to respond to the medical, scientific and social shocks of COVID-19 not as a once-in-a-century anomaly but as the beginning of a new era.

This is a subject I have written about with Professor **Richard Head** and Professor **Roy Green**, so bear with me.

In essence, our position on the pandemic was that our civilization was brought to its knees by one simple entity that was thermodynamically driven to do one thing on a global scale.

Each human has up to 100 billion neurons. But we were outsmarted by a virus with zero neurons.

What does that mean?

It means that we need to reconsider our assumptions about our anthropocentric dominance of this planet – and get our medical training and research houses, together with our healthcare systems, in order to prepare for the next simple entity that follows the path blazed by that COVID-19.

Put it this way.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, political scientist **Francis Fukuyama** wrote about ‘the end of history’.

Fukuyama was wrong.

In the aftermath of the peak of the pandemic, we cannot afford to be wrong – let alone derailed by reaction chains – because what the world is facing is not the end of history:

It is the end of complacency.

Thank you.