

**REMARKS BY THE HONOURABLE PETER UNDERWOOD AC,  
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA,  
TO OPEN THE 70<sup>th</sup> ORTHOPTICS AUSTRALIA ANNUAL  
SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCE, HOBART  
MONDAY 4<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER 2013**

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you all to Tasmania and to Hobart in particular for the 70<sup>th</sup> Orthoptics Australia Annual Scientific Conference.

I notice that your conference is celebrating its 70<sup>th</sup> birthday this year but it doesn't have, as most conferences do have these days, a theme. Notwithstanding that, I read on the conference web site<sup>1</sup> that your conference conveners, Julie Barbour and Robin Wilkinson "are planning a Conference which will not only be memorable for its excellent scientific content but also for the exciting entertainment and social events." Well, I have known both Julie and Robyn very well for many years now, and although I can't speak about the scientific content, I am certain that with them as conveners, any conference will have plenty of exciting entertainment and social events.

I see that you have a big programme to get through over two and a half days, so I expect that you will all be kept pretty busy. Now, I should tell you that I generally like to speak about some technical aspect of the relevant discipline at the conferences I am asked to open. Initially I toyed with the idea of giving you the benefit of my views on "*Does teaching applanation tonometry on a simulated eye improve students learning of an important clinical skill?*" or perhaps "*Nuances in anti-VEGF treatment in Wet-AMD (Novartis)*", but I have to confess that the only things on the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.conferencedesign.com.au/oa2013/index.html> accessed 25th October 2013.

programme that I understood were morning and afternoon tea and lunch! So, as my background is the law, I thought as an alternative you would like to hear my 3-hour dissertation on the importance of the rule of law and the historical development of an independent judiciary. However, my wife thought this might not be such a good idea after all, although I can't understand why she thought that.

I also see that the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists are holding their annual conference here in Hobart at the same time as this conference is being held, and so I thought perhaps I should consult a friend of mine who is an ophthalmologist to see what he thought might be of interest to a meeting of orthoptists, but his only suggestion was to talk about hot air ballooning. I know you may think that is a bit strange, but the fact of the matter is that he is not only an ophthalmologist but also a mad keen fanatic when it comes to hot air ballooning. It was he who told me about the fine still morning when he set off in his balloon from the outskirts of Canberra but lost his bearings when the cloud closed in. He suddenly spotted a woman walking through a paddock so he lowered his balloon and called out, "Excuse me, can you tell me where I am?"

The woman below looked up and said, "Yes, you're in a hot air balloon, hovering 30 feet above this paddock."

"You must be an orthoptist," said my friend, the ophthalmologist.

"I am," replied the woman. "How did you know?"

"Well," my friend said, "everything you have told me is technically correct, but it's of no use to anyone."

The orthoptist promptly replied saying, "Then you must be an ophthalmologist."

"How did you know that?" my friend replied.

"Well," said the orthoptist, "you don't know where you are, or where you're going, but you expect me to be able to help. You're in the same position you were in before we met, but now it's my fault."

I promise not to go across the road to the Ophthalmologists' Conference and tell the same story but with reversed roles.

It is clear that continuing professional education plays an important role in the work of Orthoptics Australia, so I decided to seize this moment to say just a little about a problem that bedevils the whole of this country and, in particular, the State of Tasmania. Did you know that 49% of Tasmanians aged between 15 and 74 years are functionally illiterate? The Australian Bureau of Statistics tells us that [quote] "approximately 174,000 people in this State do not have the basic skills needed to understand and use information from newspapers, magazines, books and brochures and that overall, Tasmania has the lowest level of adult literacy skills in the nation."<sup>2</sup> Worse, the same data tells us there has been no improvement in adult literacy levels since they were last measured in 2006. The same source tells us in a report released on 15<sup>th</sup> February this year<sup>3</sup> that 47% of all Australians aged between 15 and 74 years are functionally illiterate and that there has been little improvement over the last few years. What is not so widely known is that, compared to other developed nations, Australia is on a par with other countries such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom and Canada.

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<sup>2</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008. Adult Literacy and Life Skills Programme, Summary Results 2006. Cat No. 4228.0

<sup>3</sup> Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, Australia, 2011-2012.

<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4228.0main+features992011-2012> accessed 16<sup>th</sup> September 2013.

While illiteracy refers to a total inability to read or write, functional illiteracy is much more difficult to define, as functionally illiterate adults can generally read and write to a limited degree.

The ABS utilised four domains for the measures of literacy in their *Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, Australia, 2006*:

- Prose literacy: the ability to understand and use information from various kinds of narrative texts, including texts from newspapers, magazines and brochures.
- Document literacy: the knowledge and skills required to locate and use information contained in various formats including job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables and charts.
- Numeracy: the knowledge and skills required to effectively manage and respond to the mathematical demands of diverse situations.
- Problem solving: goal-directed thinking and action for which no routine solution is available.<sup>4</sup>

Functional illiteracy therefore focuses on the ability to comprehend and utilise the information that can be conveyed through reading and writing. A functionally illiterate person can read and possibly write simple sentences with a limited vocabulary, but is unable to read or write well enough to deal with the everyday requirements of life in their own society, i.e. he/she may have difficulty reading instruction manuals for appliances, using e-mail and internet websites, reading the newspaper, reading or writing letters sent via mail, comprehending job advertisements, past-due notices, banking

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<sup>4</sup> ABS, *Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey*, Australia, 2006, <  
[>](http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Previousproducts/4228.0Main%20Features22006%20(Reissue)?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=4228.0&issue=2006%20(Reissue)&num=&view=)

paperwork, complex signs and posters, operating in a business or office environment.

In 2002, the United Nations declared the period from 2003 to 2012 the United Nations Literacy Decade, and Resolution 56/116 [quote] “acknowledged the place of literacy at the heart of lifelong learning, affirming that: ‘literacy is crucial to the acquisition, by every child, youth and adult, of essential life skills that enable them to address the challenges they can face in life, and represents an essential step in basic education, which is an indispensable means for effective participation in the societies and economies of the twenty-first century.’”<sup>5</sup>

So, here we are at the end of the United Nation’s literacy decade and what’s the report card for Australia? Not good, according to Dr Stewart Riddle, lecturer at the School of Teacher Education and Early Childhood University of Southern Queensland who, in May this year, asked what were the options for the 1,200 workers at the Ford Plants at Geelong and Broadmeadows (Broadmeadows) who were facing retrenchment by 2016, and answered his own question saying:

“... as these workers consider their futures, we need to understand that nearly half of Australian adults are considered functionally illiterate. And manufacturing workers in Victoria, which includes those in the firing line at Ford, were found to have even lower literacy skills, with 54% scoring at the lowest levels.

The data are alarming and there are now serious concerns about these levels of literacy and the impact they have on the employment, health and education opportunities for workers.

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<sup>5</sup> Supra at page 155.

Given the strong links between increasing literacy and better employment opportunities, economic independence and social conditions including health and education, this is a serious issue not only for manufacturing workers, but for the rest of the Australian community.”<sup>6</sup>

In a recent radio interview respected Australian economist, Saul Eslake said, “I think the low level of educational attainment of Tasmanian workers is probably the single most important reason why productivity in Tasmania is significantly below levels on the mainland.”<sup>7</sup>

In a free market economy such as we enjoy in Australia, it is often claimed that it is the job of governments to provide the infrastructure to enable private enterprise to flourish and create jobs. When that is said, people often have in mind ports, railways, shipping and the like, but I want to suggest to you that the most important infrastructure for any nation is an educated and functionally literate population. For as Riddle writes “Given the strong links between increasing literacy and better employment opportunities, economic independence and social conditions including health and education, this is a serious issue not only for manufacturing workers, but for the rest of the Australian community.”<sup>8</sup>

With respect to the Australian workforce, the Australian Industry Group wrote in a February 2012 report<sup>9</sup> that the ABS Australian Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey 2006 means that over 4 million employees are functionally illiterate and 300,000 unemployed people are at a **lower level** of illiteracy than the 4 million workers who are in employment.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://theconversation.com/the-future-for-ford-workers-literacy-will-be-key-14548>. Accessed 12<sup>th</sup> September 2013.

<sup>7</sup> ABC New Programme AM, 20<sup>th</sup> September 2013 <http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2013/s3852848.htm>

<sup>8</sup> Supra. See also “Australia’s Skills and Workforce Development Needs” Discussion Paper July 2012. Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency, especially at page 48.

<sup>9</sup> “When Words Fail” National Workforce Literacy Project February 2012. Australian Industry Group.

[repeat sentence] The group conducted a survey in which 75% of respondents reported that their business was affected by low levels of literacy and numeracy, BUT - and listen to this - [quote] “only 8% of respondents reported that they had adequate capacity to assist the improvement of literacy and numeracy skills”<sup>10</sup>!!

I venture to suggest that widespread functional illiteracy is a cultural and community problem that calls for a community response rather than buckets of government money. I commend to you an excellent initiative that was launched by the Tasmanian Premier and the Minister for Education almost exactly a year ago called 26TEN - 26 for the letters of the alphabet and TEN for the first numbers. Through a network of coordinators, this initiative is an adult literacy programme delivered by volunteers who are willing to help a mate. These volunteers take a short course delivered by one of our educational institutions and then one of the coordinators will link the volunteer to a suitable learner and the process of learning to read and write, how to use technology, how to solve problems, fill in forms and so on begins. If half the population is functionally illiterate and the other half acknowledged that it had an obligation to teach literacy to the illiterate, the improvement would be dramatic.

All Australians are familiar with the so-called “Anzac spirit” - help a mate - and we need to embrace that attitude and apply it to the problem of functional illiteracy. Last year I spoke to a local audience about the 26TEN programme and said that we need to talk about it in our Rotary, Apex and other social clubs. We need sporting organisations, local councils, unions and community groups to say “we

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<sup>10</sup> Supra at page 15.

will help". Helping a mate in this way should become part of our culture; it should become just something that you do to give a hand up to someone who is illiterate. It won't take up a lot of time but it will do a lot of good, not only for social inclusion, but also to reduce the percentage of people who are living below the poverty line. At the same time, improving literacy across the country will increase the capacity of the Australian human resource to be creative and energized and thus contribute to the arts and business, making the country more prosperous and a better place in which to live. Everyone should be talking about 26TEN, and everybody who is illiterate should understand that that is nothing to be ashamed of, and everybody who is literate should be prepared to take part in the programme.

Last month the local newspaper ran a story on the 26TEN programme and said that since it was launched last year, more than 100 organisations have signed on to help. The report says that through the libraries or Learning and Information Network Centres as they are now called - LINC is the acronym - hundreds of volunteer tutors offer their time. There was a photo in the newspaper of 54-year-old Mark Enright. He said that he would like to be a motor mechanic, but his poor reading ability held him back. [quote]"In the old days you just did your job. Now there's a lot of reading and writing required, job sheets to fill in". He took the plunge and thanks his tutor, Anne, for the turnaround in his education. "I've got my first diesel car. I used to get the kids or my wife to look up how to change a diesel filter. Now I do it myself."

So, I unashamedly seized this window of opportunity to talk to you about functional illiteracy and the 26TEN programme that the newspaper says is unique in this country. I do this because I think that you are the functionally literate people who are well positioned to help

to change the culture of functional illiteracy in the country through programmes like the 26TEN and, because this is such a fundamentally important and widespread problem, I respectfully urge you all to get to work on it.

Thank you.