

Address by Robin Margo S.C.

at St Vincent's Private Hospital's Centenary Celebration with the Jewish Community

10 December 2009

Sisters of Charity and any Sisters of Mercy who may be here

Board Members of St Vincent's & Mater Health Sydney

Mr Steven Rubic, Chief Executive Officer, St Vincent's & Mater Health Sydney

Mr Robert Cusack, Executive Director, St Vincent's Private and Mater Hospitals

Dr Max Coleman, Chairman, St Vincent's Private Hospital Centenary Planning Committee

Distinguished Professors, Doctors, other professionals, managers and staff

Learned Rabbis and clergy and congregational leaders of other faiths

Communal leaders

Other distinguished guests

I acknowledge the elders and people, past and present, of the Gadigal clan of the Eora nation, the traditional owners of the land on which this hospital was built and has flourished.

Jews, like others, have contributed to the healing arts for centuries, through the practice of medicine, through scientific research and through philanthropy.

They have done so in a spirit that I know, from my own personal experience in this hospital, has been infused into the very fabric of St Vincent's, St Josephs, the Mater and the Sacred Heart Hospice as a result of the selfless, loving work over much more than a century, of the Sisters of Charity and many good men and women following their example.

That spirit I have referred may be seen for example in the life of Maimonides, to take but one example, but one that is particularly apt to today's gathering.

Maimonides (also known as Rav or Rabbi Moses ben Maimon – or as the RaMBaM, the acronym for his name), was born in the Spanish city of Cordova in the first half of the 12th Century, at a time when about one-fifth of the people in southern Spain were Jews. After the Almohades conquest of Cordova, in 1148, the Jews were offered three choices – conversion to Islam, exile or death. The young Maimonides and his family fled to Morocco, to the Holy Land and finally to Fustat (now Cairo), where at last they found refuge and acceptance.

There Maimonides wrote medical textbooks in Arabic, ten of which have survived to this day. They described many conditions including asthma, diabetes, hepatitis, and pneumonia, and influenced generations of physicians. He became the court physician to the Grand Vizier Alfadil and the Sultan Saladin. He also became the most important Jewish theologian and philosopher of the Middle Ages, influencing, among others, St Thomas Aquinas. In his later years Maimonides became famous

throughout Europe. England's King Richard asked him to be his Royal Physician, but Maimonides preferred to stay in Cairo, which had first allowed him to pursue his work.

The first reason that Maimonides is an apt reference for today's gathering is that he displayed in his interactions with patients attributes that today would be called intercultural awareness and respect for the patient's autonomy.

In a famous letter, he described his daily routine: After visiting the Sultan's palace, he would arrive home exhausted and hungry, where "I would find the antechambers filled with gentiles and Jews ... I would go to heal them, and write prescriptions for their illnesses ... until the evening ... and I would be extremely weak."

He also wrote, and recited daily as a practising physician, the following words, which became known as the Oath of Maimonides:

The eternal providence has appointed me to watch over the life and health of Thy creatures. May the love for my art actuate me at all times; may neither avarice nor miserliness, nor thirst for glory or for a great reputation engage my mind; for the enemies of truth and philanthropy could easily deceive me and make me forgetful of my lofty aim of doing good to Thy children. May I never see in the patient anything but a fellow creature in pain.

Grant me the strength, time and opportunity always to correct what I have acquired, always to extend its domain; for knowledge is immense and the spirit of man can extend indefinitely to enrich itself daily with new requirements. Today he can discover his errors of yesterday and tomorrow he can obtain a new light on what he thinks himself sure of today. Oh, God, Thou hast appointed me to watch over the life and death of Thy creatures; here am I, ready for my vocation, and now I turn unto my calling.

In those words one can see many of the same elements of spirit that have been manifested in all their work by the Sisters of Charity:

- the acceptance of all patients and people, whatever their faith, or even if they have none, as equally G-d's creatures, and deserving of love, compassion and dignity;
- the recognition that people have spiritual, emotional and religious needs as well as medical and physical ones;
- the regard for such service as a vocation, a commitment through faith to social action, and to reaching out to wherever there is unmet need; and
- a respect for human reason, with its limitations, and the courage constantly to acquire new knowledge, to challenge old certitudes, to follow commonsense into areas of need that others have avoided, and thus to remain constantly on the cutting edge of social action.

It is no coincidence therefore, and will be a badge of honour forever, that the Sisters of Charity were first, for example:

- in the 19th C, to admit patients suffering from cholera and typhoid;
- in the early 20th C to treat people suffering from highly contagious tuberculosis;
- in the 1980s to admit patients suffering from a then relatively unknown and frightening disease, HIV/AIDS, as a result of which St Vincent's became a world leader in HIV research;

- and 10 years ago, in accepting at St Vincent's the first legal safe injecting room in Australia, a courageous and practical initiative, albeit that it received its quietus at the time as a result of Papal intervention.

A second reason why Maimonides is an apt reference for today's gathering is that his contributions were only made possible by his acceptance into the then more tolerant society of Cairo. The Jews of New South Wales feel a deep sense of gratitude to the Sisters of Charity, and to their Catholic hospitals and all who work in them, for the generosity of spirit they showed, ahead of their time, in welcoming doctors and other staff of the Jewish faith, and of other faiths and cultures, to share in their healing work.

The NSW Jewish Board of Deputies is the elected, representative body of the Jewish community of New South Wales and the reaching of the Private Hospital's centenary is a very special occasion for our community, as it is for all the people of Sydney and New South Wales.

On behalf of our community, may I therefore conclude by saying, for us and for everyone in the St Vincent's community, the She'hecheyanu blessing, which has been recited by Jews for more than 2,000 years on special occasions:

Baruch atah Adonai
Eloheinu melech ha'olam
she'hecheyanu v'ki'y'manu
v'higiyanu lazaman ha'zeh

Blessed are You, L-rd
our G-d, King of the Universe,
who has granted us life, sustained us
and enabled us to reach this occasion.