

RANZCP Presidential Address by Dr Astha Tomar

I'm Astha and I'm the President for the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists for 2025–2027.

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the lands that we meet on today, wherever we might be at this moment.

I pay my respects to Elders past and present, and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and Māori people, who are here with us today.

I also acknowledge Māori as tangata whenua of Aotearoa New Zealand and recognise the significance of *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* as a foundation for partnership and equity in health.

Kia ora koutou, and warm greetings to all of you.

As I begin my term as President of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, I want to start not with a list of priorities—but with a reflection.

What does it mean to serve in this role—of being the President, representing our profession, as well as our fellowship?

And I've given this a bit of thought.

For me, it is about furthering the profession of psychiatry.

About our identity, our integrity, and our impact.

And about building a College that is connected, that is relevant, and is meaningfully contributing to our members and the communities that we serve.

And I do believe, for us as a College, this is a moment.

A moment for building that trust, establishing it, and a renewal.

A chance to reset our direction...

Reconnect with our members...

And reaffirm the core purpose and values of our College.

During my time as President-Elect, and that's a good thing that we have at our College – we get two years to really understand and prepare for this role.

And over the last two years, I've tried to listen.

To Fellows, to trainees, to SIMGs, to the communities — across both countries.

To our Members Advisory Council – a rich source of wisdom.

And here at Congress, through various presentation and the conversations that I've tried to hold with you, and I've had people coming up to me.

And what I've heard is clear:

Our members want a College that leads with integrity, listens openly, and acts with purpose.

And before we get to the specifics of the advocacy, the governance, and the reform—and we've a long list of priorities, I do want to speak to the core of our profession.

What do we do as psychiatrists every day?

We see patients.

We listen carefully.

We work with complexities.

We provide safe, evidence-based, and person-centred care.

And we do it while deeply respecting our patients' dignity, wishes, and autonomy.

This is our core work.

And it is an incredible privilege to be trusted in those moments of vulnerability.

We must never lose sight of that trust.

The world around us is changing.

Mental distress and illness is more visible, is more complex.

Systems are stretched, systems are fragmented.

And lots of times, it's really funny, it's really bizarre, but decision-makers—those who shape policy and hold budgets—either they don't, or they pretend I'm not sure— but they don't fully understand what psychiatry is, what psychiatrists do.

Frequently, we're excluded from decision-making.

And at times, we're even blamed—we're blamed by the systems, by the governments, by other clinicians, and lots of times by the communities—for gaps that we didn't create, and we tried to work through those gaps.

And that's frustrating.

Because we know how much the need out there is, which is unmet.

And we are prepared, and that's what we do, that's what we want to do.

And we also know how much the people struggling with mental health issues, our patients, how much they want us to be there—when everybody else at times step back.

So where do we go from here?

We go back to what defines us—as clinicians, as leaders, but also as advocates, not just on an individual level but also at the system level.

We must advocate with our patients, with our communities—not just for them.

And this work also has to start at home—within the College.

We're hearing these concerns.

That the College is not always listening.

That its structures—they do feel opaque and outdated.

That engagement doesn't feel inclusive.

That communication is not clear enough.

We can do better—we must do better.

We need to be clearer; we need to be more transparent; we need to be more responsive.

We need to share not only what we do—but why it matters, and how members can be a part of it.

Rebuilding trust with our membership is my top priority.

And improving how we communicate—more openly, more consistently—will be the key to that.

So as a College, what are our immediate priorities?

We will review our governance structures.

We will plan for necessary constitutional reform.

And we will redesign the College's organisational structures to better support our members, our staff, and deliver on our purpose.

We also have to modernise.

That includes investing in IT systems to support more effective, accessible, and transparent operations.

It also means being more financially responsible.

With fees having increased over recent years, we have a duty to be more efficient and more accountable to our members.

Now education is right at the centre of our mission.

The curriculum, the standards we set in training, and how we go about getting those standards met through our assessments defines the future of psychiatry.

And the trust the community puts in us as psychiatrists.

We need to ensure our education system is high-quality, fair, and fit-for-purpose.

We have learned important lessons—from AVOSCE, from CEQ—and we will act on them.

For me as President, and for my Board, this is a priority.
Understanding of what it needs to look like in the future, its strengths, its weaknesses; making sure that it works and how do we get there is also really important.

Equally, we also face our responsibilities around international medical graduates.
We need ethical recruitment approaches and initiatives that support the brain circulation, and not the brain drain.

And the College must hold ourselves, the services, the governments to account on this.

Many of us in this room were trained in countries that invested in us.
We carry with us a moral responsibility to those communities—and as diaspora members, we feel this very acutely.

One of my other top priorities will be making this College truly inclusive.

That means elevating the voices of SIMGs, Affiliates, and trainees.
That means partnering with First Nations peoples across both countries.
That means listening to people with lived and living experience.
That means creating safe and empowering spaces for our LGBTIQ+ members as well as communities, and ensuring cultural, gender, geographic, and any other diversity is not just valued—but is reflected in the way we lead.

Diversity and equity are essential to building the kind of College we all want to be a part of.

So—colleagues—here we are.
Not in crisis.
But in a moment of clarity.

We have choices to make.
Who we are.
What we stand for.
What is the kind of College—and profession—that we want to pass on.

I don't have all the answers.
But I do believe that the answers are with us.

With our membership.
In this room but beyond this room.
In our values.
In our patients and communities who remind us every day why we need to do this work.

So let's get on this journey together.
With courage.
With integrity.
And with hope.
And I look forward to being on this journey with you.
Thank you.