

Oration for Alexandra (Alex) Cotton
To be held at 11am on Thursday 18 July 2019
delivered by Professor Swaran Singh

Chancellor

It is a great pleasure to welcome to this congregation the founder of one of Coventry and Warwickshire's most important initiatives to tackle mental health issues among men, ALEXANDRA COTTON.

For many people, especially men, talking about mental health issues is difficult, perhaps even impossible. Yet, given that suicide is the biggest cause of death among men under the age of 45, it is vital to break down these barriers.

Alexandra Cotton – Alex – is a highly experienced mental health nurse, working in the Coventry and Warwickshire Partnership NHS Trust. She is the Coordinator of the Trust's campaign, 'It Takes Balls to Talk' which uses sporting themes to encourage people, particularly men, to talk about their feelings: trained volunteers visit sporting events and engage people in conversations about mental health. The idea came to Alex in 2015 at a football match which also inspired the campaign's arresting title. It was prompted, she explains, by her observation that many who turned to suicide had never

accessed support from mental health services; it was therefore necessary to break down the normal ‘social’ barriers that dissuade people from seeking help. The campaign was launched on Suicide Prevention Day in September 2016. In partnership with Coventry and Warwickshire Mind, the Samaritans and sporting venues such as Wasps Rugby Football Club, Coventry Blaze Ice Hockey Club and Coventry City Football Club, ‘It Takes Balls to Talk’ has become one of the leading campaigns for promoting positive mental health in the West Midlands. Within months of its launch, it had had 90,000 interactions on Facebook, reached 1.5 million people via radio, and engaged over 30,000 people at sports clubs. Although the campaign’s main focus is on men, the volunteers also talk to women – it’s important, Alex believes, to see how they respond when men talk about mental health and to engage them in breaking down the stigma stemming from sexual stereotyping.

Alex’s campaign has found wholehearted support here at Warwick. Our University strategy promises both staff and students ready access to wellbeing support services and to sport– we strongly believe in promoting positive mental health through sport and an active lifestyle. We have welcomed Alex and her colleagues to campus over the past couple of years during Mental Health Awareness Week, when they have joined with our own Health and Wellbeing Team to promote the services available to students and staff; they also attended last year’s ‘Welcome Week’ for new students.

Alex has also been an influential driver and collaborator in another major mental health initiative in Coventry and Warwickshire: the Street Triage Scheme. This sees mental health nurses accompany police to incidents where police believe people need immediate mental health support. It means that vulnerable people are responded to sensitively and more effectively. Launched in Coventry in 2015, in the first year of its operation in the city over 1000 people had been seen and referred to appropriate help. Alex is now a Senior Practitioner for the Street Triage Team.

Alex's exceptional services to mental health have been recognised by an MBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours List of 2018, and by the Coventry Mental Health Star Award in the West Midlands Mental Health Commission Thrive Awards, also in 2018 and the NHS70 parliamentary Star awards.

We at Warwick are delighted to add our own accolade to Alex today.

Chancellor: in the name of the Senate, I present to you for admission to the degree of Doctor of Science, *honoris causa*, ALEXANDRA COTTON.

578 words