

**Wednesday 18 January (3pm)**

**Mechai Viravaidya (LLD)**

Mr Vice-Chancellor. At ceremonies such as this, it's commonplace to announce people with the most grandiose of titles. One minute we're addressing a Baron, the next we're introducing a former Archbishop to the audience.

Nevertheless, I am confident this is first time we have had the privilege of introducing someone internationally known as...Mr Condom.

It's certainly an unusual moniker, but is one earned through the most inspirational of methods. At Warwick, we want our people to make a positive impact in the world. Today, we honour someone whose positive impact in the field of public health changed a whole nation. Thailand can be grateful for the efforts of its Mr Condom: Mechai Viravaidya.

Mechai, who was born in Bangkok just over [76] years ago, is the son of two doctors who both believed it was right they should help the poor. These values were passed down to Mechai, who studied Commerce at the University of Melbourne before returning to Thailand. He worked as an economist, evaluating the government's development programmes. It was at this time Mechai fully appreciated the challenge facing Thailand. By the mid-1970s, rural women in Thailand were having approximately seven children per family. The country was gripped by poverty. As Mechai himself said, "What hit me was that there was no way schools and doctors could keep up with the birth rate."

So Mechai took it upon *himself* to find a way.

In 1974, he founded the Population and Community Development Association. This non-profit organisation transformed Thailand's attitudes around sexual health. Rural women were given access to contraception. People were encouraged to speak more openly about sex. And, Mechai used humour to remove the stigma attached to condom usage. That explains the condom-blowing contests for schoolchildren conjured up by Mechai. That explains the string of restaurants that accompany customers' bills with a condom - a chain of restaurants called 'Cabbages and Condoms'.

Thanks to Mechai's vision, thousands of rural school teachers and village community members were also mobilised and trained. Together,

they achieved a dramatic decrease in Thailand's annual population growth, from 3.3% in 1974 to 0.6% in 2005. That average figure of seven children per family came down to less than two per family.

The candid style of Mechai and the PDA once more had the desired effect in the late 1980s, when the HIV and AIDS epidemic was at its height in Thailand: by 2004, Thailand had experienced a 90% reduction in new potential infections, compared with infection rates in the early 1990s.

Unsurprisingly, Mechai has earned a raft of accolades for his achievements. Among them are recognition as one of Asiaweek's "20 Great Asians" in 1995, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Award for Global Health in 2007. It's also no wonder academic institutions are keen to celebrate his impact.

Today, we join the universities of Melbourne and Monash in honouring this influential figure.

For us at Warwick, our admiration for today's honorary graduand is not simply rooted in the enormous impact he has had. It is also the *manner* of that influence that makes our esteemed guest especially distinctive. One of the attributes that fuels our University is creativity – it may not always be apparent, but it inspires our research findings. It imbues much of our teaching. It allows us to reach new heights, and find deeper understanding. Sometimes our creative approach takes us into difficult places, but unlike a number of our peers, they are risks we're prepared to take.

The man who joins our community today is also a risk-taker: one that has taken those risks with a lightness of touch and an engaging sense of irreverence. He's made people laugh, think and, at times, uncomfortable. But, in order to transform a nation, he has embraced creative means to tackle apparently insurmountable challenges.

Mr Vice-Chancellor, in the name of the Senate, I present to you for admission to the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, Mr Mechai Viravaidya.