

SPECIAL ARTICLE

CONVOCATION ADDRESS DELIVERED ON 18TH NOV 1984 TO MEDICAL, DENTAL AND LAW GRADUATES

Chew Chin Hin

Mr Pro-Chancellor, Graduates, Ladies & Gentlemen,

May I, first of all, thank the Vice-Chancellor for inviting me to deliver the convocation address for this year to the graduates of the Medical, Dental and Law Faculties of the National University of Singapore. My pleasant duty is therefore to proffer you our heartiest congratulations on your having surmounted the trials of your final examinations. Almost 30 years ago I somehow survived a similar ordeal and though I must admit that my memory is not so clear, I remember the sense of elation I felt at the Loke Yew Hall of the University of Hong Kong. But it certainly never occurred to me then that I would be asked one day to make a convocation address.

Indeed it is a great privilege on this occasion to share with you some thoughts on the noble vocations which you have chosen. Today you are celebrating your success and we rejoice with you in this. You can rightly feel a sense of triumph and achievement and I am sure you are now looking to the future with enthusiasm and great expectations. Although much of what I have to say is addressed principally to medical and dental graduates, many points would, I believe, be applicable also to our legal brethren.

**Deputy Director of Medical Services
Ministry of Health and
Board Member, School of Postgraduate
Medical Studies, National University of Singapore**

Chew Chin Hin, PPA, AM, MB, FRCP Ed, FRCP Glas,
FRACP, FACP

The standard of the medical profession in this country continues to experience a high degree of approval and respect from the public. But this is not unqualified. Expectations continue to rise, criticisms come more frequently from the better educated and therefore seem more likely to increase than to decrease.

The doctor's first responsibility is and will always be to his patients. On entering the profession, he shares with all his colleagues a commitment to care for the sick. The rapid pace of change in society and in science and technology can render any body of knowledge quickly outmoded and irrelevant. Only recently your Chancellor, our President, declared that an outdated doctor is as useless as antiquated technology. The doctor, the dentist or for that matter, the lawyer, who allows himself to fall behind and who becomes obsolete, will not escape detection. Today's success therefore should represent but a staging post, albeit an important one from which to advance in your professional career. Indeed you must always fan the flame of enthusiasm for learning for the rest of your lives.

In the same way as you partake in the life-long process of continuing medical education, never forget that an equally important responsibility is for you to share with your colleagues whatever you yourselves have learnt. Indeed the very title "doctor" from the Latin *docere* "to teach" implies a responsibility to share knowledge and to impart information. This includes reporting the results of observations and of scientific research to colleagues, the teaching of medical students, house officers and other physicians. In keeping with this principle, the use of secret remedies cannot therefore be condoned.

Osler, often regarded as the founder of modern Medicine, declared at the beginning of this century that "the practice of Medicine is an art, not a trade; a calling, not a business; a calling in which your heart will be exercised equally with your head." In this age of new techniques of diagnosis, treatment and medical breakthroughs, there exists a tremendous excitement for technological developments. While many of these would be positively beneficial to mankind, the medical profession as well as society is now and will increasingly be faced with an unprecedented variety of complex and difficult problems. In all these, the art of Medicine stands constantly in danger of contamination. Thus it behoves us to pause and take a look at our sense of values, consider whether the love of humanity which hopefully led most of us to our calling may not sometimes become overlain by ambition and worldliness. Whilst the doctor deserves reasonable compensation for his services and professionalism, let not the public and our patients have the impression that the sense of vocation which has been one of the prime elements in our calling is being overwhelmed by other considerations of a more material nature.

May I therefore suggest to you that vocation and duty to the patients and to society in general should take precedence much over material compensation and the commitment to the patient is not ever to be taken as optional. Indeed this is a fundamental principle that has stood the test of time for centuries, from the age of legendary Aesculapius, the Egyptians, the Greek Physician Hippocrates, regarded as the father of Medicine, the Christians in Asia Minor and the Chinese physicians nearer us in the East to the present. Let me summarise the crux of these codes "The principal objective of the medical profession is

to render service to humanity with full respect,... to each one a full measure of service and devotion,... and equally for rich and poor, high official or commoner, educated and uneducated, friend and enemy, native and foreigner without distinction."

No one can doubt that any amongst you lacks intellectual competence. Nonetheless in assuming his responsibility to do what he thinks is best for the patient, each of you should always remember that no doctor can be expected to be competent in all aspects of Medicine. Furthermore experience in practice cannot be acquired except over a period of time. Certainly experience cannot be compressed. Therefore my advice to you on this is that you should never hesitate to obtain assistance when required in the care of your patients or seek consultation when this is requested for by the patient or concerned parties either openly or tacitly. Under certain circumstances multiple consultations may be required. Indeed, the welfare of the patient must always be paramount in the consultation process. Misplaced pride has no place in this but can only prejudice the care of the patient.

Amongst the several clarion calls of our time are improved communication, greater involvement by doctors in administration and self-monitoring and evaluation of our performance as doctors and I believe this to be of greatest importance. I trust that you will allow yourselves to be involved in each of these aspects of professional life, but I would remind you that you will fail to fulfil your duties unless at the same time you continue to retain and develop those qualities which will enable you to be adequate to the individual human situation. The transmission of even the most desperate news can be softened for instance by placing a kindly hand firmly on the shoulder. My plea is that we apply our science and our ministrations with all understanding and sympathy. As you choose those courses of action which facilitate effective communication and continue to maintain professional competence, your relationship with the patient will be sealed by understanding and acceptance with mutual trust and deep respect.

Inseparable from this is the doctor's own moral and ethical standards. In this regard, let me quote Dr Johnson:

"Integrity without knowledge is weak and useless, Knowledge without integrity is dangerous and dreadful."

Any personal conflict of a material or commercial interest that compromises loyalty and sound treatment of patients or collusion with parties for personal financial gain must be regarded as morally reprehensible. Thus it is best that doctors avoid any business arrangement that might because of personal gain influence their decisions in patient care. Society has conferred much of the professional prerogatives the doctor now enjoys. In turn the doctor is responsible and accountable to society for his professional and moral actions. He holds as if it were a franchise granted by society, the rights, privileges and duties pertinent to the patient-doctor relationship. Never forget that these rights and privileges can be withdrawn if they are not exercised responsibly.

Like any other good citizen, the doctor should strive for the well-being of the community. He should work towards ensuring the availability of adequate medical care for all individuals. In this regard, he must necessarily be aware of the economics of medical care to ensure that care is provided in the most efficient manner. Effective medical care and practice therefore require not only scientific knowledge and

mastery of technology and skills as well as the art of taking care of the patient, but it must be guided also by appropriate sensitivities to the social and economic issues of the community as a whole. Ideals must be tampered with what is practical and what is available. Doctors as a group are becoming increasingly aware of the limitations of the present medical care system in terms of improved patient health the world over. One study in the United States found that 9% of patients receiving general medical service had their lives threatened or severely disabled as a result of treatment. Clearly more medicine with more technology does not equal more health.

No doubt as we acquire more knowledge and experience, we will certainly find some of the presently acceptable modes of therapy to be less useful or even harmful. There must be recognition of our limited capacity to intervene as well as an appreciation of the limits to medical care, especially as real benefits from intervention may be disproportionately small despite considerable efforts, often at enormous cost. Thus resources and facilities at our disposal must be used with discrimination and responsibility.

Finally may I mention something quite different. I do not believe you can be a good doctor or a well rounded lawyer unless you enjoy a full life and involve yourself in activities outside the practice of your vocation. To work hard is important, so is leisure as well as social interaction with others. Take pleasure from music, literature, sporting activities or sometimes even from idling, though of course too much of the latter is not recommended!

In leaving you these thoughts, may I congratulate you once again and may I add that you have the nation's admiration for your achievement today. Our Prime Minister in his National Day message in this 25th Year of Nation-Building had expressed his faith in the younger generation. The future of Singapore is yours. Accept your responsibilities and your calling with heads held high; fix your thoughts on what is good and right. If I may paraphrase with deep deference the proclamation of a prophet of old in reference to enlightened youths:

"You will mount up with wings like eagles, you will run and not be weary, and you will walk and not faint."