2011 Commencement Address for the College of Health Sciences graduates in Public Health, Nursing Science, and Pharmaceutical Sciences, and the Department of Education

Chancellor Drake, distinguished faculty, Graduates, family and friends,

I am truly honored to address you and mindful of the expectation for me to provide words of wisdom and advice about the professional world you are entering.

At first, I thought it challenging that this was a joint commencement, but your chosen fields are similar in several ways.

- All of these are ancient and noble professions that are absolutely essential in any society.
- In most societies, both health and education are basic human rights.
- Both attempt to shape behavior and teach people how to improve their lives.
- Both Public health and education are significantly undervalued and underfunded

They are also interdependent, as education is a core component of health care and a determinant of health

Why do they get someone who is a different generation and towards the end of their career to do these addresses? I was classmates with your Chancellor (but that is not why I was invited--and I promised not to say anything to embarrass him.) We went to school in San Francisco during another era--a time of social change and turbulence: the time of hippies, the Vietnam war, and skepticism of authority or anyone over 30. I laugh when I see the pictures of our class because we were a pretty freaky looking bunch – but nearly all went on to have very successful careers.

What relevant contribution I can make today is not a discourse on the state of health or education in this country, but some of the things that I have learned during the course of my career that I wish I had known at the beginning. When telling some of my colleagues about this talk, none of them could remember who gave their commencement address.
You will probably not remember either, but I will be successful if each of you remembers one thing that I say.

As Mark Twain remarked: “When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years.” I am relieved that you are all over 21.

I have had the privilege to experience a varied career with work at both ends of the health spectrum, from the individual rescue side of emergency medicine to the population and policy perspective of public health. Although some of my colleagues speak disparagingly of changes and challenges of a career in health care, I do not regret my choice in the least and I am still very proud and enthusiastic about my profession. No matter what I tell you, each of you will have a unique career and will have to learn certain things for yourself, but I hope to provide some perspectives and ideas for reflection that might influence future decisions.

You might not want to hear this after spending your entire life in school, but you have chosen fields that require a life-long commitment to learning. The health field changes so quickly that you must commit to keeping up or you become dangerous. Since you cannot know everything, you need the intellectual honesty to acknowledge what you do not know. Never be afraid to say “I don’t know, let me find out,” or afraid to ask questions of your colleagues. Your generation is fortunate to have unlimited and nearly instantaneous access to information. Use your technology and have the integrity to look up facts about which you are not certain. You can bet that your patients will look up the information.

But there are other dimensions to your education. “Wisdom equals knowledge plus experience.”

Some of your experiential learning will be difficult and even painful, because it will be from mistakes. In medicine, one has to hope that these mistakes do not cause anyone serious harm. Mistakes can be devastating, both personally and professionally. Make sure that you learn from these and remember the lesson but don’t carry remorse forever.
Although technical skills seem most highly valued now, it is the human touch that has the most lasting impact. Many times I have heard patients criticize a colleague that I know was an excellent physician. The reality is that patients or students don’t know how technically expert or knowledgeable you are. They may not remember what you said or didn’t say or what you did or didn’t do, but they will always remember how you made them feel.

William Osler (considered the father of modern medicine, who helped found Johns Hopkins University and was the first to engage medical students in bedside teaching) once said: “The person who has a disease is more important than the disease a person has.”

Our patients need caring, empathetic, and comforting health care providers. The same can be said for teachers who need to form some sort of bond to be effective with their students and to overcome negative peer or community influence. The systems in which you will work generally do not teach you how to do this. Learn and practice communication skills, including verbal, body language, eye contact, and expression of empathy. Don’t just rely on your position of power. Don’t fool yourself into thinking that your patients or students will listen to you solely because of authority.

You may have all come to your chosen fields with different motives, but you have to have some altruism to work in medicine, public health, or education. The people in your community are entrusting themselves and their children to you. It is a huge responsibility and a privilege that you must not forget.

People are not always pleasant—they can be unattractive and difficult. Empathy does not mean that you absorb the problems of the world around you. Few if any of you can reach the singleness of purpose and dedication of someone like Mother Teresa. Being in a helping profession, you have to work at maintaining your own balance and health. But you can abide by an oath written by a 12th century middle eastern physician and philosopher, Maimonides: “Inspire me with love for my art and for thy creatures. In the sufferer, let me see only the human being.”
Not every ill person, student, or community group will be amenable to your best ideas and attempts to help them. Health and education are greatly influenced by community conditions, social and economic inequities, and current social policies. These can defeat your best efforts to influence individuals. The important point is that you have an opportunity to influence people’s lives and an obligation to try, but no change will occur until that patient, student, or community takes responsibility and initiate it themselves.

To enhance your professional effectiveness and your career potential, I encourage you to develop and maintain a community perspective. Public health understands this best since we routinely operate at this level. And this is where your disciplines intertwine. In a recent editorial in the Journal of the American Medical Association, Steven Woolf argues that health status is determined more by education, income, and the neighborhood environment than by the interventions of physicians or hospitals. In our society, educational level not only predicts income, but life expectancy. The prevalence of diabetes among adults without a high school diploma is more than double the prevalence among adults with a bachelor’s degree. The risk of stroke is 80% higher among adults who lack a high school diploma than among those with some college education.

Your generation will regrettably inherit many complex problems that require a fresh perspective and multi-disciplinary approach. Smoking cessation is one of the best examples and one of our successes. When I was a medical student, patients were allowed to smoke in the hospital unless the physician wrote a specific order forbidding it, and small packs of 3-4 cigarettes accompanied every airline meal. Compare that to our smoke free environment and much lower rates of smoking now. These have been accomplished through a combined approach of medical and pharmaceutical interventions; patient education guided by behavior change theory; hard-hitting anti-smoking ads to shift the cultural image; and changing government policy to restrict cigarette company advertising, ban indoor smoking, and impose excise taxes to fund further anti-smoking efforts and help pay for medical consequences.
Currently our greatest health challenge is obesity. A.G. Kawamura, our former California Secretary of Food and Agriculture reminded me that both too many calories as well as too few calories are forms of malnutrition. Obesity is causing skyrocketing rates of diabetes and its myriad of health complications and corresponding increases in our health care expenditures. While we do need to find better means of treatment, primary prevention requires changes in our food culture, our agricultural policies, access to affordable healthy foods in schools and community, and increasing physical activity in our computer/TV/video culture.

My last example is the low achievement within our national public educational system, which is deeply interconnected with a multitude of health problems from violent injuries to teen pregnancy and substance abuse. There is vigorous debate over where to apply the interventions to be most effective: is it at the level of the community, the school, the students, or the teachers? The answer is probably all of these. We know that money is necessary, but not sufficient.

The leadership qualities that are needed to address these types of complex problems as well as more acute crisis situations have been described by a group at Harvard as meta-leadership. Meta-leaders envision a creative solution and motivate broad participation in a shared course of action among people and agencies that generally do very different work. They collect and analyze data to support strategic approaches to action. The meta-leader also uses self-awareness, motivation, and social skills to lead those below them as well as those above them. These are qualities that would help any of you to be an effective leader.

Your academic achievement alone goes a long way toward setting you on a path to success in your life and career. Some of you will be superstars and be recognized for brilliant work. For the rest of us, let me conclude with a list of five practical suggestions for a successful career.
1. Establish a good work ethic. Be on time and willing to work hard and always strive to do excellent work. Don’t be a person looking to do as little as possible. Be conscientious in your work, even if it is a repetitious or tedious task.

2. Get along with people. Interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence are learned and improve with practice like any technical skill. You do not have to be aggressive to advance. People and opportunities will come to you if you are easy to get along with, competent and willing to work.

3. Be intellectually and emotionally honest. Maintain and increase your competence through continuous learning. It is better to be known as someone eager to learn than someone who is overconfident and does not perform according to claims or expectations.

4. When you voice a complaint to your boss, always propose a solution to the problem.

5. Be willing to take a risk to try something new in your career. This should be a calculated and strategic risk based on your intuition and your true interests, not a reckless risk.

Finally, one thing that you cannot always control but deserves mention: it does not hurt to have occasional luck such as being in the right place at the right time, working for the right boss, or having the right personal connection.

You are already among the fortunate to be well-educated and professional. I congratulate you again on your accomplishment of graduation and your choice of professions. I want to close on a philosophical note that acknowledges both the responsibility and opportunity of your choice:

Leo Beck (20th century rabbi and philosopher) said: "One can always find warm hearts who in a glow of emotion would like to make the whole world happy but who have never attempted the sober experiment of bringing a real blessing to a single human being. When we are approached by a human being demanding his right, we cannot replace definite ethical action by mere vague goodwill."

You are all embarking on the path of ethical action through your promising careers.
Thank you and best wishes.

Howard Backer, MD, MPH
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