

## The Privilege to Care

(The following article is taken from remarks given by Dr. Sonntag to incoming students at the “White Coat Ceremony” at the University of Arizona Medical School in Tucson.)

Thank you Dr. Moynahan, Dean Goldshmidt, President Shelton, distinguished faculty, fellow physicians and guests. I want to welcome and congratulate the incoming medical students and especially the families who supported these students through the many years to help them attain the goal of entering medical school.

This ceremony allows me the chance to welcome you and to congratulate you on the journey that you are beginning and to validate your presence among us as life-long learners and future colleagues.

You are entering a world that is mysterious, exciting, enlightening, and yes, difficult. A cadaver will be your first patient. Respect the human body. Learn from it, obtain knowledge from it, but always remember that this body once housed a human life—one that was gracious enough to give you the opportunity to discover the macro- and micro details of human anatomy.

How will you react when you walk into the lab where you will learn gross anatomy on that cadaver? How will you react when you examine that first patient, draw blood, or do your first lumbar puncture? These are the moments that will shape your next four years. These are the types of experiences that will make you a doctor and provide you the armamentarium, the tools, the knowledge to take care of patients.

You will be challenged with paper work, technology, tests, bureaucrats, long hours of studying, electronic medical records, and difficult classes. You will also

experience profound emotions—sadness, disappointment, failure, and stress. You will witness pain and suffering, loss of limbs, and even loss of life. However, through your four years here, never forget why you wanted to be a physician, a doctor. Do not lose the eagerness, the spirit, and the joy that helped you choose medicine. You want to help people. You want to care. You want to fulfill what you think it means to be a good doctor. Do not lose the feeling of amazement that you now have, that is, the privilege of helping a fellow human being—the privilege to care.

A strong patient-physician relationship is paramount to being a successful doctor. You will be allowed access to patients' secrets, their stories, and their private lives. In fact, you will be allowed access to their bodies, both superficially and deep inside. They grant you this intimacy, the invasion of their very being, in exchange for some encouragement, some hope that you will be able to alleviate their pain, disorder, disease, or illness.

Similarly, you as a student and eventually as a doctor will talk with patients and their families to discuss and explain the good, joyful news or the sad, sorrowful news of a family member's illness or possible death. You are the shepherd, the guide who helps the family make informed critical decisions, even to advise them that the time has come to let their loved ones be subjected to no further intensive medical or surgical care and let the normal passage from life occur. You will be with patients at extraordinary moments, such as at the birth of a child. You may hold that child for the first time, even before the mother. She in fact trusts you to hold that newborn before she does.

You will see a patient in the clinic after a successful treatment or successful surgery that you were responsible for, and you will know that you have changed that life

for the better. You might be at Starbucks having a cup of coffee when a patient or patient's family member hugs you and thanks you. Such moments make the challenging times worthwhile. This will be your reward for becoming a physician.

As a medical doctor, you work both on the brink of science and the brink of humanity—something only an MD can do—not a Ph.D., not a scientist, not an engineer. Only medical doctors integrate art, science, and research to touch human beings, patients, in such profound ways. Only medical doctors can take knowledge and discoveries from research and apply them directly to human beings or even invade those human beings. In other words, only you can apply science to patient care. You will be given that trust, that responsibility.

Once you put on that white coat, you will have the satisfaction of helping people in a way that no other profession can offer. Healthcare reform is here. It may change financial aspects of patient care. It may change how a patient receives that care. It may even dictate which patient you can or cannot take care of. Over the years healthcare legislation has come and gone. But an interesting contrast to the turmoil of the political world is the constancy exhibited in the core principle of the Hypocratic Oath. Although this oath dates to antiquity, it is still very much alive and relevant today. Indeed, many of the core duties and ethical applications of a physician transcend the meddling of politics and policy makers. That is to say, whatever storm of controversy might be swirling around the medical community, the overarching objectives in the operating room or examining ward or patient's room remain clear and simple: Heal the sick, ease their pain, comfort the person.

The basic patient-doctor relationship should and will not change. If the patient has an illness, pain, or disease and seeks help, the knowledge you acquire in the next four years, combined with humility, dignity, and compassion, will give you the capability to take care of that patient.

Other changes will take place during your medical school days and during your residency. Technology will continue to evolve. Advances in diagnostic studies, genetics, research, biomechanics, pharmacology, robotics, patient care, surgical techniques, and much more, will surely occur. Although much has changed and will continue to change over the course of your career, your role as a physician, teacher, counselor, healer will not change.

I am a neurosurgeon, and my residency was long and difficult. However, it was the solid foundation, the knowledge, and the wisdom obtained in medical school that prepared me for that vigorous residency. I performed many long and difficult surgeries. I had the privilege of taking care of many, many patients. But all of them were individual human beings that gave me their trust and had faith in me to take care of them.

For me, part of that obligation was making daily morning rounds before clinic, conference, or surgery. I also made daily evening rounds just before leaving the hospital to make sure that my patients were recovering and stable, that the staff and I were on the same page about their care, and most importantly, to discuss with patients and family the progress or regress, the concerns or worries that might have evolved during the course of the day. Never forget how science, art, and the magic of medicine form the relationship between the patient, family, and doctor.

It has been a few years since I was in your position, ready to study medicine in the first class at the University of Arizona Medical School. This was about the time that the Beatles were in their heyday and the first moon landing occurred. Christian Barnard from South Africa had just performed the first heart transplant. We started with thirty-two students. Four left, and two transferred in, and thirty students graduated in that first class in 1971.

When I started the first year of medical school, I was anxious, excited, worried, thankful, and fearful all in one. What would the next four years bring? Would I make it? Would my fellow students become my colleagues, my friends? What would my teachers, my mentors, my professors be like?

Back then, the surroundings were different. When I started medical school in the first class here at the University of Arizona, there was no hospital and no upper classmates to show the way. The basic science building was not yet finished being built. We went to classes through a construction site. We had no cafeteria. Our lunch consisted of homemade sandwiches eaten sitting on cardboard boxes. Did we care? Of course not. We were medical students. We were in medical school. We were starting to become doctors. We were in awe and wonder. Yes, it was hard, strenuous, and difficult, but also joyful and certainly worth it.

You will face many hurdles between today and your graduation. Take one step at a time. There's life outside of medical school. There are stars in the sky. There are flowers on the ground. Family and friends need your attention as well.

Many of your fellow classmates will become life-long friends. Certainly, I was fortunate to forge such relationships during my days as a medical student. Cherish and

build upon that friendship. Even though the friends I made went in different directions as their careers developed, we have continued, over the years, to share a deep friendship. Friends that you will make here will help you to get over the hurdles facing you, so that you can cross the finish line together.

During your four years, you will be exposed to many aspects of medicine, from the laboratory, to the classroom, to the clinic, to the operating room. Keep your mind open. Enjoy the wonders of each specialty and subspecialty. You know which one will fit your character, your personality, where you will make the difference, and hence, which residency to choose.

Many students at the University of Arizona College of Medicine have preceded you. They had the same trepidations, worries, concerns that you have right now. They have graduated and have touched thousands of lives, alleviating pain, improving patients' conditions, curing illnesses. Your ability to touch lives starts right now. You have been selected from many applicants. You have paid your dues to become medical students, to wear the white coat. With the help and guidance of your faculty, your professors, your mentors, and with the help of your fellow students and family, your journey to become a physician starts now. You can do it. You will do it. Welcome to the glorious vocation called medicine. Welcome to the journey to become a physician, a healer, a doctor. Welcome to the privilege to care. There is no better calling. Congratulations and good luck. Thank you for your attention.