

The Medical Commencement Archive

Volume 2, 2015



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Oakland University William Beaumont School of Medicine
Commencement Address

Declaring an Affirmation of Commitment

Robert Folberg, M.D. is a physician, professor, and innovator in medical education and ophthalmology research. He received his B.A. degree from LaSalle University and M.D. degree from Temple University. He is board certified in Anatomic Pathology and Ophthalmology. Dr. Folberg became the Founding Dean of the Oakland University William Beaumont School of Medicine in September 2008. He is a clinician scientist who was funded for 20 years by the NIH to study uveal melanoma and

has published more than 200 original articles and book chapters. He continues his practice of ophthalmic pathology at Beaumont Health System where he is William Beaumont Hospital's Chief Academic Officer.

A few weeks ago, I boarded a flight to return to Michigan. Planning for this commencement dominated my thinking and as I settled into my seat, I imagined the captain making this announcement:

“Good Afternoon. This is your Captain, and I want to assure you that this airline has certified me as competent to fly this aircraft.”

What would I do? I would bolt for the door and I suspect that other passengers would follow. We expect our pilots to be more than competent. We hope that each of them could land our plane in the Hudson if required, and we also hope that they would keep us calm through the crisis.

The public expects the same of their physicians - of you - of all of us. We are expected to exceed competency and to nurture and develop the personal qualities that can calm someone in need - in need of a physician.



OUWB was designed to help you to answer two questions successfully: what do I want to do, and who do I want to be? To us at OUWB, the answers to both questions are equally important.

The “what do I want to do” was answered by your mastery of information and technical skills, and you have been recognized for this accomplishment by receiving your diploma and hood today. You are now “Doctors of Medicine”.

To answer the second question - who do I want to be - requires training, practice, and commitment. You were invited to come to OUWB because you excelled academically and because you provided evidence to us of experiences and attributes that predicted you would become physicians who are empathetic, compassionate, and engaged. You were immersed in a learning environment that modeled for you the behaviors that we believe are important for physicians to demonstrate, and your curriculum embedded elements such as PRISM, self-directed learning through your Capstone projects, and a re-examination of “Who do I want to be?” through a continuous immersion in medical humanities and clinical bioethics alongside the sciences.

Over the course of the past four years, you re-examined the commitment that you made to the study of medicine when you recited the Declaration of Geneva at your White Coat Ceremony. You modified this declaration in ways that are insightful and meaningful.

In a few moments, you will recite the Oath or Affirmation that you created. You will make this commitment publicly, not silently, and although you will recite this oath individually, you will do so together as a community.

Among the innovations found in the Oath that you authored over the past four years are these:

- You are promising to take care of yourselves so that you may care for others.
- For you, it is not enough to promise to “do no harm” - you are promising to advocate for your patients’ best interests.

- For you, patients are not defined by their illnesses - they are not “problems to be solved” - they are individuals who come to you for help, and you therefore promise to recognize your patients as individuals with spiritual, social, and emotional needs. Your OUWB humanistic education has prepared you for this.

- You recognize that we all have conscious and even unconscious biases that, if unchecked, could compromise our ability to practice medicine. How could we allow our biases to interfere with the practice of medicine if everyone has infinite value?

- You consider the practice of medicine to be a privilege. You promise to honor the profession and to conduct yourselves with compassion and dignity.

“For you, patients are not defined by their illnesses - they are not “problems to be solved”... you therefore promise to recognize your patients as individuals with spiritual, social, and emotional needs.”

Toward the end of this remarkable oath or declaration, you promise to be brave in the face of adversity. How will you accomplish this? Identifying role models such as Mary Fisher will help you to realize that others are capable of such bravery and that you can aspire to be like them. When the former Dean of the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth, my colleague Dr. Chip Souba, spoke at a honors convocation here at OUWB, he encouraged all of us to create for ourselves a noble vision of who we might be and he suggested that by clinging to this vision, we can overcome adversity. Today, I suggest that if you keep the promises that you are about

to make, you will, over your professional lives, not only continue to accumulate knowledge and skills as life-long learners - to continue to answer the question of “what do I want to do” - you will also spend your lives answering the question - “who do I want to be” - and I recommend to you this afternoon that the answers to both questions are foundational to the practice of medicine.

Finally, I call to your attention a line in your oath that appears in the original Declaration of Geneva: “I will give to my teachers the respect and gratitude that is their due”. I wouldn’t blame you for thinking that this verse pertains to you giving respect and gratitude to your teachers at OUWB and throughout the residency that lies be-

fore you. Today I want to suggest an alternative interpretation, an interpretation that compliments the obvious. As we grow in the profession of medicine, we lose our teachers. Some retire, and others come to exist only in our memories. Many of my own teachers are no longer available for me to consult when I reach the limitations of my knowledge and skills. So to whom do I turn now for help? I turn to the very students whom I have taught. Frequently, stymied by a case that challenges my abilities, I turn to my younger colleagues for help, and often, these are the very individuals who were my students. In a very real sense, I owe to them, my students, the respect and gratitude that is their due.

Today, you crossed an educational threshold and are known now as Doctors of Medicine. You have become our colleagues. And by reformulating the Oath of Geneva into the Oath of the OUWB Class of 2015, you have become our teachers. We respect you and we thank you.

I invite you now to rise and prepare to commit yourselves publically to the profession of medicine, and I invite all physicians present to rise and affirm these commitments alongside our new colleagues.

Please recite each verse after me:

I solemnly dedicate my life to the service of humanity.

I will care for myself so that I am able to care for others.

I will advocate for my patients' best interests and protect them from harm.

I will recognize the spiritual, social, and emotional needs of my patients.

I will respect patient autonomy.

I will protect the doctor-patient relationship by maintaining confidentiality within the constraints of the law.

I will honor the practice of medicine and conduct myself professionally.

My colleagues will be my brothers and sisters.

I will acknowledge my limitations and ask for help when I need it.

I understand that my clinical decisions and political actions will impact society.

I commit to lifelong scholarship and will let evidence guide my practice.

I will give to my teachers the respect and gratitude that is their due.

I will not allow personal bias to unjustly alter my practice of medicine.

I will resist coercion and will not use my medical knowledge to violate human rights.

I will be brave in the face of adversity.

I am privileged to practice medicine, and will do so with compassion and dignity.

I make these promises solemnly, freely, and upon my honor.