

# The Medical Commencement Archive

Volume 2, 2015



## Dr. Howard Kyongju Koh, MD

Yale School of Medicine  
Commencement Address

### Finding Your Calling

Dr. Howard Kyongju Koh is the former United States Assistant Secretary for Health for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

Dr. Koh oversaw the HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health, the Commissioned Corps of the U.S. Public Health Service, and the Office of the Surgeon General. At the Office of the Assistant Secretary for

Health, he spearheaded programs related to disease prevention, health promotion, the reduction of health disparities, women's and minority health, HIV/AIDS, vaccine programs, physical fitness and sports, bioethics, population affairs, blood supply, research integrity and human research protections.

Dr. Koh graduated from Yale College and earned his medical degree from Yale University School of Medicine. He has earned board certification in four medical fields: internal medicine, hematology, medical oncology, and dermatology, as well as a Master of Public Health degree from Boston University.

Dr. Koh previously served as the Harvey V. Fineberg Professor of the Practice of Public Health, Associate Dean for Public Health Practice, and Director of the Division of Public Health Practice at the Harvard School of Public Health.

---

**D**ean Alpern, Deputy Dean Belitsky, Associate Deans Angoff, Vender, Ment, Lee and Schwartz; graduates, faculty, students, families and friends - Congratulations Yale Medical School Class of 2015!

What a glorious day! Congratulations for graduating from one of the great medical schools in the world, led by our universally respected Dean Dr. Bob Alpern. As an alumnus, I am especially thrilled to return today because Yale has changed all of our lives. Like you, I have family members who were so proud I could attend this great school. Like you, I met faculty at Yale who not only taught me but also believed in me. And like you, I made friends at Yale who were destined to stay with me for a lifetime.

So as I begin, let me thank many Yale colleagues in the audience: my cherished faculty advisor from long ago Dr. Morris Dillard, my lifelong friends Dr. Ron and Amy Vender, and my teachers Drs. Rick Edelson, Larry Cohen, Irwin Braverman and Tom Duffy. I am so moved that the graduation speaker from my own Yale Medical School commencement over 30 years ago, Dr. Bob Gifford, is here today. And I am grateful to be joined by my beloved family: my physician wife Dr. Claudia Arrigg, the most dedicated doctor I know; my inspired mother Dr. Hesung Koh, and my most loving and internationally-known brother Professor Harold Koh, former Dean of Yale Law School.

In just a few moments, you will receive your degree and forever after be known as "Doctor." Armed with that title, you newly-minted physicians will officially join the ranks of our time-honored and revered profession. Earning the title of "Doctor" represents a magnificent achievement! But I know many of you are wondering, "what lies ahead for me? How will I make a unique contribution to my new profession? And how will I find fulfillment and meaning in my future years as a doctor and physician?"

Many of you aren't at all sure how to answer these questions and that's fine. When I was attending my own Yale Medical School graduation over 30 years ago, I had no idea what those answers might be. And for those of you who have every step planned out for the future, let me assure you: it won't happen that way. As the famous saying goes: "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans". And it was Kierkegaard who once said "Life can only be understood backwards but it must be lived forwards."

So how will you find fulfillment and meaning in the years ahead as new physicians? It is my heartfelt hope that you can view the future as an adventure where you can discover, and truly live, your calling. Many of you understandably feel that, as new physicians, you now must prove yourself to others. Indeed so many of you will now struggle to meet external expectations.

But as you do, please listen carefully to your inner soul so that you can discover your own sacred calling. Doing so will help you express yourself, not just prove yourself. Doing so will help you determine in your life what is ultimate versus what is merely important. Doing so will help you truly embrace the spirit of the late Yale Chaplain Reverend William Sloane Coffin who once joyously proclaimed, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive!"

Let's start by considering the external expectations of others. Within a matter of minutes, you as doctors will encounter a whole new level of expectations that you never could have imagined. Your new title of "Doctor" will fundamentally change how people interact with you.

For example, distant family members you never knew you had will soon be contacting you. They will be expecting professional advice on a wide range of medical conditions that you never heard of. Travelers sitting next to you on airplanes will eagerly share their symptoms with you. They

will expect immediate and brilliant insights about prognosis and cure (especially when they learn you went to Yale). And utter strangers will clamor to show you all kinds of skin lesions on all kinds of body parts, expecting an instant diagnosis! Everyone will want to hear from "the Doctor."

What they are doing, of course, is expressing their trust in you. One gift that accompanies your new title is the profound trust that others have in you as a healer. This trust, one that few other professions enjoy, must be cherished and never taken for granted. When you enter the room with your white coat on, the bond created between doctor and patient can be instantaneous. So treat all your patients with ultimate kindness

and ultimate respect, if for no other reason than some day, sooner rather than later, you will be a patient yourself.

But as you address these external expectations, please also listen to the innermost parts of your soul. Doing so can help you fully discover the unique ways you can make a difference in life, not just as a physician but more importantly as a human being. This also is a matter of trust. It means trusting that there is a unique path for you ahead. It

means trusting that you were put on this earth for a special reason. It means trusting that this journey, starting at Yale and now moving beyond, is all worth it. To me, this is the essence of finding meaning and fulfillment in your life. For it has been said that the two most important days of your life are: the day you were born and the day you discover why you were born.

One way to learn more about meaning through your journey is to respect how your patients find meaning in their own. They can teach you in unexpected and profound ways. Sometimes the patients who will educate you the most will be the ones you couldn't cure, no matter how hard you tried.

For example, I remember once caring for a

**"It is my heartfelt hope that you can view the future as an adventure where you can discover, and truly live, your calling."**

“One gift that accompanies your new title is the profound trust that others have in you as a healer.”

business CEO who, despite his end-stage cancer, insisted on reporting to work every day. When I as his physician gently inquired whether he really wanted to spend his precious last days in this manner, he calmly replied “Doctor, when I am at work sitting behind my desk, life is normal. And I want my life to be as normal as possible.” That was many years ago and he is now gone. But that response left me greatly humbled. For while he acknowledged the expectations of others, he knew what gave his life meaning right up to his last moments.

Since graduation from Yale Medical School, I can report that my journey has unfolded in remarkable and unpredictable ways. It began a generation ago when my courageous parents travelled to this country from Korea searching for the American dream. They told us children how lucky we were to be born in this country and how it was our duty and destiny to make something of ourselves. I wanted to be a physician and clinician for as long as I could remember. So I started my career determined to cure every patient put before me. Caring for another person’s health is an extraordinary privilege – one, we physicians all can treasure.

But I also discovered that far too many of my patients were succumbing from preventable conditions, such as tobacco addiction, cancer, substance abuse, HIV and much more. Too many were also overwhelmed by societal forces over which we individual physicians had no control, such as

poverty, discrimination, lack of education and lack of insurance. These realizations were initially a source of great personal and professional anguish. I have since found that many other physicians have also experienced such agonizing moments when we see disease and try to cure it; when we see pain and try to soothe it; and when we see suffering and try to stop it.

After caring for so many suffering preventable suffering and dying preventable death, I started to wonder if there were other ways to prevent disease and keep people healthy in the first place. So when opportunities came to enter public health and public service, I took the leap, supported by the tremendous love of my wife, family and friends. It was not an easy transition and there were many moments of personal and professional disruption. But it also led to life-changing experiences as a physician in government, first as Massachusetts Commissioner of Public Health and most recently as US Assistant Secretary for Health for the Department of Health and Human Services in Washington DC.

I now feel blessed to have served through many extraordinary chapters in our country’s public health history: protecting people in the wake of 9/11 and anthrax attacks, contributing to the global response to the H1N1 pandemic, leveraging new authority by the FDA to regulate tobacco for the first time in US history, supporting the First Lady’s historic Let’s Move! Initiative that brings new attention to the challenges of childhood obesity, joining the US delegation at meetings at the World Health Assembly in Geneva, and of course, helping to implement the historic provisions of the Affordable Care Act.

Looking back, I now understand that I was answering a call. I feel so blessed and grateful to be able to do so. So it is my hope that you too can find and live your unique calling. Because we need your talents and skills now more than ever.

Dear graduates, you are becoming physicians at a time when our society is facing so many critical health challenges. In the era of health reform, our nation is now grappling with the most fundamental questions about how we care for

patients and prevent disease. And despite the obstacles, we now have in our hands brilliant opportunities not only to extend new health insurance coverage to millions of Americans but also to create a true system of care, prevention and public health for all. I know each of you, as new, committed physicians, can make a unique difference for every community across our great country.

And if you are like me, your path toward finding your calling probably won't be direct, straightforward or even obvious. So as opportunities arise in the future, you must be flexible. For as it says in the good book "Blessed are the flexible so that ye shall not be bent out of shape."

And as you explore the future, please also remember that your success will depend so much on how you live your personal lives. Medicine is an all-consuming profession and throughout your careers, you will be regularly confronted by a host of demands that will personally test you to the limit. Some of those challenges will be physical, others emotional, social and even spiritual. So please pay great attention to how you live your lives, not just as doctors, but as individual human beings. That was the fundamental wisdom Dr. Gifford conveyed to me and my classmates when he spoke at our Yale commencement years ago. And I am honored to pass that message on today.

So take care of yourselves and cherish the loved ones who will always provide you with constant and loyal support. Honor your friends and never take them for granted. Explicitly thank them for being wonderful companions with you on the journey. Cherish your family and tell them you love them. Because after all, the true definition of a family member is one who really knows you-- but loves you anyway.

So in closing, congratulations Yale Medical School Class of 2015! Welcome to the world of medicine! We rejoice in your promise as new healers. We have great hopes for you for the future. May your years ahead be filled with adventure, meaning and fulfillment. May you be fully alive in everything you do and find your sacred calling as special healers for this world.

And perhaps one day, you too will have the

**"As you explore the future,  
please also remember that  
your success will depend  
so much on how you live  
your personal lives."**

incredible honor of returning here and telling the assembled graduates how Yale has changed your life. Thank you and God bless you all.

