

The Medical Commencement Archive

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Claire Pomeroy, M.D., M.B.A

Northeast Ohio Medical University Commencement
Address

Your Gift (and Obligation)

Claire Pomeroy, M.D., M.B.A. is current president and CEO of the Albert and Mary Lasker Foundation. Under her leadership, the Foundation's mission advanced to: "improve health by accelerating support for medical research through recognition of research excellence, public education and advocacy." As an expert in infectious diseases, she passionately supports ongoing investment in a full range of research with special interest in health care policy and a focus on the importance of the social determinants of health.

More than 100 articles and book chapters have been published by Dr. Pomeroy. As a leader in her field, Dr. Pomeroy serves on the board of trustees for the Morehouse School of Medicine and the board of directors for the Sierra Health Foundation, the Foundation for Biomedical Research, iBiology, Inc. and New York Academy of Medicine. She is also a member of the board of directors for Expanesthetics, Inc. and for Becton Dickinson & Company. In 2011, Dr. Pomeroy was inducted into the National Academy of Medicine.

Dr. Pomeroy earned both her bachelor's and Doctor of Medicine degrees at the University of Michigan. She completed her residency and fellowship training in internal medicine and infectious diseases at the University of Minnesota. She has also earned an M.B.A. from the University of Kentucky. In 2016, Dr. Pomeroy received an honorary Doctor of Science degree from the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Dr. Pomeroy has held faculty positions at the University of Minnesota, the University of Kentucky and the University of California-Davis. At the University of Kentucky, she served as the chief of infectious diseases and associate dean for research and informatics. In 2003, Dr. Pomeroy joined University of California-Davis as executive associate dean and served as vice chancellor and dean of the School of Medicine from 2005 through 2013. She became president of the Lasker Foundation in June 2013.

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raduates, today is your day of celebration! Today your hard work culminates in the great honor of receiving your degree. Today your family, your friends, and your community celebrate your dedication and your successes. Today, you officially join the most noble of the professions – those dedicated to improving health and serving others. Congratulations!

By virtue of the credential you now hold, people will turn to you at their most vulnerable moments. They will share with you, as with no other, the intimate details of their bodies, their darkest fears, and their dearest hopes for the future. They will turn to you with the hope that you will discover new knowledge, new insights, new cures. They will literally trust you with their lives.

This trust is a gift and an honor. Always remember that this honor comes with great obligations. The obligation to use your knowledge to benefit others. The obligation to put patients' needs above your own and to embrace the value of altruism. The obligation to be a leader, to take on the responsibility of addressing the needs of all your communities - both locally and around the globe.

You are graduating in an unprecedented time of challenge for our nation and for our professions. You will practice your new profession in an era of tremendous change, as we rise to address the urgent need to reform our health care system and achieve our mission of ensuring better health for all.

It has been said that, "Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability"; it comes through bold vision, continuous work, and unflagging dedication. This is what you are called upon to do. So as you accept your diploma today, you are also accepting the charge to lead us in the change our country needs. Seize the moment.....lead the debateand define a brighter future.

Use the power of your education to redesign our care delivery system so that it is truly a health care system, not a sick care system. Use your new knowledge to create a system that highlights prevention and wellness; a system that provides coordinated care; a system that is safe, accessible, affordable, and equitable. Embrace your role as a societal leader – one who will work to correct the parts of the health care system that fail to serve the principles of social responsibility and social justice.

The United States has led and achieved tremendous advances in medical care - from vaccines to transplants to DNA sequencing to stem cell therapies and more. These are extraordinary milestones of progress that we, as health professionals and as a society, can be proud of. But we cannot be proud of the fact that our country continues to experience unconscionable health inequities. Our health care system remains inaccessible and unaffordable for too many in our nation - and health outcomes fall far short of what a great nation like ours should achieve.

The United States spends more per capita than any other country on health care, and yet has tragically disappointing outcomes. Despite spending almost twice as much per person compared to other developed nations, we rank among the worst in indicators ranging from infant mortality to life expectancy. We must proclaim that this is unacceptable. Our health care system today is characterized by shameful health disparities - disparities on the basis of race, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, immigration status, and socioeconomic class. Your

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health status should not be determined by the color of your skin or the zip code in which you live. We must proclaim that this is unacceptable.

As Martin Luther King profoundly stated nearly five decades ago, “Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane.” Yet these disparities and inequalities are even more true today. Consider that:

- Men without a high school diploma live a decade less than men with college degrees.
- People with the highest incomes live ten to fifteen years longer than those at the bottom income levels.

These are statistics. But their importance is in the lives of real people. Here at NEOMED, you learned that the call to change is urgent. You know that the failure to act is measured in human suffering. The cost of inaction is no longer bearable.

Robert Kennedy said, “Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope.” To the students we celebrate today: Together, you can set in motion multiple ripples, and those ripples can come together as an uplifting wave to improve health for all.

So how do you choose the ripples you wish to make? As you embark on this journey, the answers will come, I believe if you can discover and follow your own moral compass. To do so, you must look inside yourself to identify your core values and use them as your guide. Our core values define who we are, what we prioritize, how we use the opportunities we are given. Our life’s experiences shape our core values and those values in turn influence the life path we choose to follow.

“Embrace your role as a societal leader...”

For most, our core values are rooted in our childhoods. For me, it began in a home that was full of abuse and fear. And by the time I was 14, the choice was clear. Stay and risk my life - or leave and learn how to survive on my own. So I escaped - running into the dark night. Just 14, scared and alone - uncertain where I would sleep or where I would get food to eat. When a stranger gave me money to call a teen counseling center, I met people who found me a place to stay and helped me enter the foster care system.

I lived in four foster homes. My first foster home was an “emergency placement” and just as I was thinking maybe I could trust them, it was time to go. From this, I learned about how hard it can be for the vulnerable and abused to trust the system, to trust even those dedicated to caring. My second placement was with an African-American family, who though not quite knowing what to do with this blond, blue-eyed white girl, opened their home with kindness. From them, I learned about race, equality and social justice. My third placement was also with an African-American family. They were welcoming, but I was wary. Then, one day I was doing the laundry – a load of whites – and accidentally added a red sweatshirt. I was petrified – from my experiences growing up, I expected punishment and harsh words.

Instead, they said, “it’s okay.” Suddenly we were united by a common color – pink. From them, I learned about compassion and forgiveness. My final placement was with a couple who became foster parents just to take care of me - and to them I will always be grateful. They saved my life. I learned that by giving of ourselves, we can give life to others. I beat the odds. People ask me if my job today as President of the Lasker Foundation is hard, and I tell them that nothing is as hard as being a teenager alone, struggling to survive.

In a lot of ways, I was lucky. I had foster parents who took care of me and teachers who believed in me. But I saw a lot of foster kids who were not so lucky; kids who were failed by the system; kids who society was willing to “throw away”; kids who saw no future and therefore gave up hope. From those children, I learned what really matters. From their teachings, my core values of caring for the vulnerable and fighting for social justice were born – and those core values have been my moral compass and have guided all that I have done since.

I went on to complete medical school, and my training in infectious diseases. I entered practice just as a new, unknown --and at the time, terrifying -- disease called HIV/AIDS began claiming the lives of previously healthy gay men. I saw young men who looked like old men, their bodies failing painfully and catastrophically from a devastating, fatal illness. I saw them experience heart breaking rejections, even in death, from families, friends and work colleagues who could not accept that they were gay.

I found myself working in a society and in a health care system that often rejected and stigmatized my patients.

As I established the first HIV/AIDS clinic at the Minneapolis VA, I fought for those men against unfair judgment and abandonment. I will always be grateful to the patients I worked with during those early years of the epidemic. They taught me that sometimes you have to push the system to do what is right, to work toward the greater good. Most importantly, those patients taught me what courage is and that love and acceptance are ultimately more powerful than hate and stigma; that caring will always be stronger than rejection and discrimination. And through this work, I was given the opportunity to live my core values of equity, diversity and social justice that had been shaped by my early life experiences.

So, I share with you with one piece of advice: Embrace your core values and understand what gives meaning to your life, so that you can know the right way for you to give meaning to other people’s lives. Starting the AIDS clinic, living in foster homes, surviving on the street as a teenager are the experiences that have led me to live every day of my life serving one primary purpose - helping the most vulnerable, the people society is willing to abandon. For me, my core values are stirred to passion by the reminder that, as many have said, “The greatness of a society is defined by the way it treats its most vulnerable members.”

Patients will bring much more than health challenges to the health care system. They bring the harsh realities of life, and their

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health issues will frequently represent symptoms of the disappointing inequalities in society. And this means that to care for them, we must be community leaders who address social issues.

Raise your voice to educate others what we now know to be true - that health is determined only in small part - about 10% - by the care delivered in hospitals and clinics; that a much larger part is due to social determinants - factors such as income, education, safe housing, job opportunities, and access to healthy foods - all the circumstances in which we live, work and play. Addressing these social determinants - these fundamental drivers of health status is a big task - but it is one your time here at NEOMED has prepared you to take on.

This is your time to live your core values and attain the ultimate goal - making people's lives healthier and society stronger, kinder and more just. You are the future of this country's well-being - and I am confident that each of you will help fill the world with hope, happiness, and health.

In closing, I ask only that you heed Harriet Tubman's call to action as she said, "Every great dream begins with a dreamer. Always remember you have within you the strength, the patience, and the passion to reach for the stars to change the world."

Congratulations, class of 2017! Live your dream! Change the world!