



DES MOINES UNIVERSITY

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WHITE COAT CEREMONY – COLLEGE OF OSTEOPATHIC MEDICINE
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BECOMING HUMANISTIC PROFESSIONALS

Thank you...

I want to begin by congratulating you, our distinguished students and your families, for the achievement of becoming a part of this class at Des Moines University. Along with the faculty and administration, I look forward to your donning of what is surely the recognizable part of the physician's wardrobe, the white coat, that for well over 100 years has symbolized the scientific foundations for the practice of medicine. Today, in recognition of the next step in your journey towards the practice of medicine, we will call on the symbolism of the white coat as your studies will soon focus on the care of patients, which is the essence of who you will become as physicians.

You likely believe that you are at the beginning of this journey, but in reality you have already accomplished much as evidenced by being accepted as a part of this distinguished class. However, there are still many miles and many challenges to experience and enjoy, or survive, on your pathway as a physician.

You have come to Des Moines University, which has a 120-year history of excellence in the health sciences. We exist to improve lives in our global community by educating diverse groups of highly competent and compassionate health professionals. We chose you because we believe in your abilities and you selected us because you have confidence in our ability to prepare you for an exciting future.

The word compassion appears in our mission statement for a good reason: The mere essence of our mission reflects a genuine desire to focus on the humanistic side of medicine.



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Humanism in medicine describes the relationship between physicians and their patients that is founded on respect and compassion. It is reflected in attitudes and behaviors that are sensitive to the values, autonomy, cultural and ethnic backgrounds of others.

So, in my remarks today I want to focus just a bit on the word humanism, and why humanism in medicine is an essential ingredient.

Frankly, there is a very positive expectation that goes along with this word: The idea makes you think of trying to make life better for everyone and leaving the world a better place for those who come later.

Humanism offers a basis for moral values, an inspiring set of ideals, a rationale for living life joyously and an overall sense of purpose and meaning. In medicine, it means compassionately caring for patients, families and all who are a part of the system of the delivery of care.

Some may think that professionalism and humanism are the same. I think they are different, although intertwined. Professionalism is a set of behaviors; humanism is a set of beliefs and values. One can learn to act professionally, but it may only be on the surface.

Those good, surface, superficial behaviors are too often not sustainable in our chaotic world of health care delivery. Professional behaviors are necessary, but not sufficient for the humane practice of medicine. Patients want to be treated by physicians who are not only masters of their craft, but also deeply care for them as people.

Professionalism is important, but is professionalism all there is to serving as a physician? Is it enough to go through the motions without the virtues that should form their foundation?

To me, this is a vitally important point: Doing the appropriate acts that define a professional might be easy during a routine day, but less so when under stress. The daily chaos of medical practice provides many opportunities to forget to act professionally. Being reminded to do the appropriate things might be easy



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when in the presence of patients, but just as easily forgotten when not in their presence, whether in the hallway, elevator, cafeteria or when the patient is asleep in the OR.

And, even for us, administrators, faculty/educators, doing the appropriate things directed towards a medical student or resident might be easy, but easily forgotten when dealing with a less-than-helpful staff member, or non-compliant patient, even when a medical student might be watching. How we react at these times underscores our fundamental values, and we need to be aware of this and model appropriate reactions as well as we can. We need to draw on our humanistic values to sustain us during times of stress.

As educators, we know that our greatest impact is in the informal and hidden curricula. The informal curriculum is learning that arises out of sporadic, happenstance, and idiosyncratic interactions between students and teachers. It can happen anywhere and at any time. The hidden curriculum is the difference between what an organization says is its mission and what happens in the trenches. Medical education is experiential, and students learn by experience. We are the role models. The value of humanistic care is most often conveyed to students and residents when observing administrators and faculty during their daily activities. We must continue to reinforce a culture that stresses the importance of altruism, integrity, respect for others and compassion.

My charge to you as students, is that you must tap into the emotional dimension of caring for patients, because only then can we validate what it means to be a humanistic professional, not just how to act like one. Without true empathy and respect for the human condition, a commitment to professionalism becomes, largely, an intellectual exercise.

I believe that being a good physician is possible by being a good professional, but being a great physician requires both behaving and believing.

In many ways the ancient philosophers were right when saying that true humanism is reflected in a consistent set of values that we all should have; values of wisdom, justice, courage and moderation. As physicians, you have the incredible honor of being able to make a positive difference in the lives of others, to live values of wisdom, justice, courage, and moderation; to provide hope to those around us. No matter what the environment, no matter how onerous the marketplace might be, no matter how oppressive the bureaucracy,



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we can't let these dim our days, darken our zeal, or diminish the medical profession.

So, as you don your white coats today, you assume not only the responsibilities but also the obligations that attend to those who choose to provide care to other human beings.

These obligations include:

- To be honorable in all phases of your life
- To excel in your academic studies and training
- To be compassionate
- To be accountable
- To collaborate with others as an interprofessional team member
- And, to support a culture of inclusiveness.

By accepting these obligations, you become part of the legacy of thousands of DMU alumni whose contributions to medical care have alleviated suffering, saved the lives of countless individuals, and maintained the integrity and high ethical standards of health professionals.

In all that you do, as you go forward on this journey, I ask that you place the highest priority on respect for the dignity and diversity of all people. Continue to embrace the values of honesty, accountability, collaboration, and inclusiveness as the basic tenets of integrity. Remain committed to fostering a climate that doesn't just tolerate differences but treasures them because we become better citizens of this world and better health care providers when we embrace the rich opportunities afforded to us when we learn from our differences.

I am convinced that you are on the verge of greatness. You will be successful as future health care providers, not just because you will be well trained, but because you have the heart and soul of a compassionate individual who believes and behaves in a way that defines humanistic care!

Thank you, and congratulations!