

2013 OHSU School of Medicine Commencement Speech

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Before I began serving in healthcare, I served as an infantry officer in the United States Marine Corps. This job was the polar opposite of healthcare in that it consisted of using violence and weapons to help make things better. Despite the stark contrast, the Marine Corps taught me to put others before myself and to be something called a *servant leader*.

In combat, I witnessed the tragedy of violence, but also the miraculous power of modern medicine. It has given me the greatest respect and appreciation for all caregivers and healers, to whom I am especially proud to speak to today. The truth and importance of your sacred mission are never in question. You are the epitome of compassion in our society and I stand in awe of your mission and the work you are about to begin.

Let me stop for a moment and say “Thank you” for the opportunity to speak to you today. I am humbled and I am grateful. I want to recognize the Division of Management for the outstanding training and education of the past three years. The fruits of your labor are being realized. You have, in fact, created tomorrow’s healthcare leaders, today.

I also want to thank my fellow classmates. We’ve learned as much from each other as from any classroom instruction we’ve received. It has been a pleasure getting to know each one of you. Lastly, thank you to my wife Anna and our two little ones, Josephine and Collin. You have sacrificed much over the last three years. Too often I’ve left the house before you were awake and didn’t return until everyone was sleeping. It hasn’t been easy, but being here today makes the sacrifice worth it.

I realize there are many healthcare professions graduating today and I congratulate each and every one of you. But, I would like to take a moment to specifically address the new physicians. If there is one thing I have learned over the last three years, both in academia and my professional life, is that healthcare is in desperate need of change agents. And it is physicians, more than anyone else, who I believe possess the influence to help make change happen.

Because of your skills and the care you provide, the patient listens. Because you can bill for services and generate revenue, the hospitals, insurance companies and other healthcare businesses listen. Because you have taken an oath and are first and foremost compassionate healers, society (all of us here in this room) listen. Bearing in mind your influence, I call upon you to be agents of change, to demonstrate courage, and to help lead the disruptive innovation that is so desperately needed in healthcare.

At last year's graduation, the president of OHSU Dr. Joe Robertson, talked about a turbulent but exciting time in healthcare. This is absolutely true. Significant changes are occurring in the American health system, yet we face problems that seemingly defy reason. You may already know about some of them:

- Americans spend more on healthcare than any other developed country, but we rank 42nd in the world for overall health system performance.

- *Preventable* medical errors are the third leading cause of death in the United States. They represent almost 200,000 needless patient deaths each year. That is the equivalent of a jumbo jet crashing every day for an entire year.

But perhaps most familiar to you is that of medical education reform. Despite current social and economic trends, an overwhelming prevalence of chronic disease, and the growing shortage of physicians, the cost of a medical education continues to grow at twice the rate of inflation.

It is an outrage, that a new physician who plans to practice family medicine will have an average medical education debt of more than \$200,000 upon graduation. The cost is more than the value of my family's three bedroom home and two vehicles combined. No new physician who intends to practice family medicine should walk out of this room today with that kind of debt on his or her shoulders.

The complexity of healthcare easily rivals that of the complex socioeconomic and counter-insurgency issues I dealt with in Afghanistan and Iraq. There are no easy answers. Unlike Afghanistan and other parts of the world however, there are no terrorists lurking in our midst. In the American healthcare system, we are our own worst enemy.

So how do we fix it? Before I ever got to lead Marines, I went through almost a year of intensive leadership training. For the last three years, this MBA program has helped me to become an even stronger leader. The most important skill I have learned and what I think is required to change healthcare more than anything else, is that of *servant leadership*.

A title means very little if you can't get anything done and healthcare is simply too complex to get anything done alone. The best healthcare organizations are places that breed servant leaders. They serve their patients, they serve their community and they serve each other. It is only working as a cohesive team: patient, physician, pharmacist, nurse, technician, housekeeper and administrator, that we will break down the barriers necessary to improve healthcare and the health of our nation. If you are walking across this stage today, you will automatically be looked to as a leader. I ask that above all, you be servant leaders. So in the spirit of St. Francis, I say:

- *Do not tolerate* injustice, or be afraid of challenging the status quo. *Be courageous*.

- *Do commit* to serving the most vulnerable of our society, the sick, the poor, and the aged. *Be committed*.

- *Do not let* those who suffer, do so alone. Comfort them and feel their pain. *Be compassionate*.

- And finally, *be foolish enough* to think that you can make a difference. As fools we will do the things that others say cannot be done and we will do them together!

Class of 2013- Thank you for allowing me to speak to you today. It has been my honor.