

J.S. "Dutch" Reinschmidt Lecture
Delivered by Sima Desai, MD
OHSU School of Medicine White Coat Ceremony
OHSU Auditorium
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Will You Remember?

Thank you to Ms. Maxine Reinschmidt, her daughter, Sandy, and the senior leadership of the School of Medicine for the opportunity and great privilege of speaking to you all today.

I send my deepest congratulations to you, the Class of 2014 on your tremendous accomplishment, your entrance into medical school, the beginning of the most amazing journey you will ever experience. And to your partners, children, parents, siblings, grandparents, relatives, friends, mentors and anyone who has influenced your life: congratulations to you all as well. For it is not without our support system that we could come to this day, to this moment.

Dr. Reinschmidt for whom this lecture was named was an incredible human being and physician and I have had the distinct pleasure of speaking to a number of individuals who knew him. What emerges is a physician who understood the value of giving to his patients, to the community and to the overall health of our state. He was a true innovator, delivering education to all parts of the state, no matter how remote, informing our state legislators, and teaching our medical students. It is through the history and knowledge of remarkable physicians such as Dr. Reinschmidt and others that we can truly understand what makes a great physician.



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But, what is it that makes a great physician? Surely, there must be secrets maybe only known to a few? Well, before I tell you these very well known but at times forgotten secrets, let us step back in time. Do you remember the first time you thought of being a physician? Was it going with your mother or your grandfather who was a doctor and witnessing the amazing wonders of medicine? Was it the time you were playing with your friends and they wanted to play trucks, or dolls or balls and you would have rather watched a medical show on the human heart or spent your time in the science museum? Or was it the time someone in your family became ill and you watched the care being delivered and thought, “I want to do that” or perhaps “I could do it better”? Or was it that moment, when you had entered another career or particular path in college and you realized the intangible: those varied moments in your life that led you to want to be a doctor and that being a doctor was your calling, your place to be in life. Whatever your moment or moments were, they have now led you to this place; this single moment when you step over the threshold and into the profession of medicine.

There is a quiet, very special if not magical moment of realizing you have made it. All your work, commitment, and desire have led you to this place. Take a moment to truly appreciate your accomplishments. It is a wonderful feeling.

As you step through the door and into the profession of medicine, you will be expected to remember more than you have ever been asked to remember and do more than you can ever remembering being asked to do, except maybe by your mom! There will be times when you wonder, “how could I possibly remember or know or do this much?” You will be challenged in so many ways throughout your medical career. Some you can already imagine, some that might surprise or shock you. But through it all, there will be some very important things that you **MUST** remember. I referred to them earlier as secrets. Are they truly secrets? The Oxford Dictionary has multiple meanings for secret. A secret is something that is kept or meant to be kept unknown or unseen by others. No, these secrets should not be kept unknown or unseen, definitely not. A secret is something that is not properly understood. No, in fact these secrets are quite understood. Perhaps, it is the last definition: that a secret is a valid but not commonly known or RECOGNIZED method of achieving or maintaining something. A secret is a key to a desired end, like the secret of longevity or for you, the secret of being a great physician.



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Now that I have built up this moment, you must be thinking one of them must be intelligence and the acquisition of medical knowledge. Intelligence is a requirement. Acquisition of medical knowledge is a must. You could not have made it here without intelligence. This capacity to learn, retain, at times regurgitate and apply knowledge constantly and effectively will continue throughout your career and though it is very important it is not the only important concept that makes a great physician.

These secrets, the key to a desired end—being a great physician— are patient stories and empathy, gratitude, humanism, self reflection, and humility, social responsibility and personal wellness. They seem so simple, so true, so important. They are but will you remember when it matters most, when it is needed most?

Will you remember the patient's story? It started so subtly. The slight twinge of weakness in the left leg. The muscle aches, the fatigue, the fever. Maybe it was a long day, maybe, it will be better tomorrow. It did not get better. Eventually the weakness moved to the right leg and it got harder to walk around, to move with his previous speed. A week later and unrelenting weakness, he went to his doctor. Mr. W had become so weak he could not even roll over in bed. He was promptly sent to the hospital and with frighteningly quick speed we drew more blood work than would seemly humanely possible to give. No answer. Mr. W proceeded to have multiple tests: muscle biopsy, nerve studies, MRI of the head, spinal tap. And still no answer. We called for more doctors to help: neurologists, infectious disease doctors. No answer. With all the technologic advances of our time we could not find the answer. But the answer was in the story. As we learned of Mr. W's life as a vineyard owner in Washington, his self education in the world of grapes, and their close knit friends and neighbors, a single important piece of information emerged. "You know it is possible that someone else could have been sick near us," Mrs. W thought out loud. "Yes," said Mr. W, "Our neighbor I think got sick, a virus or something." That day we called Mr. W's regular doctor and subsequently learned that in fact a neighbor had become ill and the county health system had found a dead crow carrying the West Nile Virus. We had our diagnosis, his diagnosis. Despite our multiple tests and multiple minds, it was hearing the deeper story, the one beyond his symptoms that led to the diagnosis and more importantly a deeper understanding of who he is, who is around him, his condition and its impact on his life. Harvesting season was coming soon.



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Who will help my wife? How will I recover? Will I recover? Dr. Rita Charon wrote an article on patient stories and stated “listening to stories of illness and recognizing that there are often no clear answers to patient’s narrative questions, why did this happen to me, what will become of me, demand the courage and generosity to tolerate and to bear witness to unfair losses and random tragedies.” Our empathy develops when we understand this whole story. All of our scientific knowledge did not help us. It was the meaning and significance of his story that gave us direction, a name to his initially faceless disease. Inside of his story, we grew in our empathy for his plight, the difficulties, the triumphs. If we don’t understand or take the time to hear the story, we will miss subtle clues, hints to their mysteries which could prolong a suffering, miss a diagnosis and worse, be deaf to our patient’s complete needs. Your empathy will be derived from the story. Mr. W will not be the man with weakness in room 5, bed 2 by the window. He will be Mr. W, the hard working, kind, intelligent vineyard owner who suffered an unexpected tragedy in his life but eventually recovered. In a New York Times article by Anatole Broyard called “Doctor Talk to Me,” he eloquently states at the end of the article, “not every patient can be saved but his illness may be eased by the way the doctor responds to him ... He has little to lose and much to gain by letting the sick man into his heart. If he does, they can share, as few others can, the wonder, terror and exaltation of being on the edge of being, between the natural and supernatural.” So will you remember your patients’ stories, your own empathy?

Will you remember your gratitude, humanism, self reflection and humility? To remember that you have been allowed into the most sacred place, the place of trust? Mr. J, a middle school science and math teacher, father of three young children with new back pain and a sudden diagnosis of cancer. Mr. R, a WWII veteran and welder, a shallow and deep sea diver repairing PT boats during the war, admitted with many organs failing. Mr. J, another WWII veteran, an anti-aircraft gunman, describing the loss of 16 friends in one night during the war admitted for a new stroke. Ms. S, who knew she was dying from an incurable lung disease, waiting for her two sons to come see her, one from prison, one from the military. Mr. B, the young active and healthy man who suddenly started bleeding and eventually died from leukemia. You will be faced with enormous and often tragic stories. It is easy to become hardened and yes, it may seem even harder to be present and in the moment. But for every moment that you can be and need to be there you will find an unshakeable trust between you and your patient. A true privilege. You are being allowed to enter into the fabric of someone’s life. Remember your humanism, your gratitude.



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At some point you may quietly watch a physician go in and brush aside a nurse or a dietician who is doing important work in the care of a patient. Or you might hear a physician say, “I don’t have time for that patient right now.” It is in these moments, when you must resist the temptation to embrace those actions or behaviors in your future. Remember why you came to medical school; remember this moment, these feelings. Patients are most vulnerable in illness and you will be given much leeway in society to do what you believe is best. Honor the trust that has been placed upon you. Feel gratitude.

Take the time to reflect on conversations you have had with patients, ways you have interacted with them, and stories you have been told. Start journaling your experiences, read books on patient and physician stories. Self reflect. Assess your biases, your values. Understand yourself. When you better understand yourself, you will better understand your patient. Though you have been through much to arrive at this point, you enter a most sacred and trusted profession. You will be told secrets no one else knows, you will share moments born out of pure tragedy as well as pure happiness.

Maintain your humility. As Dr. Coulehan recently wrote, “many aspects of medical education and practice foster a sense of personal entitlement that threatens to strangle altruism.” Do not allow this to happen. We are fortunate to be allowed into patient’s lives, not the other way around. As Dr. Coulehan states at the end of his article, “an ounce of humility is worth more than a ton of arrogance.” Francis Peabody, who was the chief of the Harvard unit medical service at Boston City Hospital, gave a lecture to medical students in which he finished by saying, “one of the essential qualities of the clinician is interest in humanity, for the secret of the care of the patient is in caring for the patient.” He gave that lecture in 1925. Will you remember your gratitude? Your humanism? Will you remember to actively seek self reflection? Will you remember to embrace humility?



Will you remember your social responsibility? As outlined in the Charter on Medical Professionalism, one of the fundamental principles is the principle of social justice. It states: the medical profession must promote justice in the health care system, including the fair distribution of health care resources. Physicians should work actively to eliminate discrimination in health care, whether based on race, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religion or any other social category. Our current health care system is not fair. We are advanced in our technology yet 47 million people are uninsured and do not or can not receive healthcare. We cannot continue on this trajectory as a nation. But we can individually still make an impact.

Will you remember that you can make an impact? A young physician arrived from Chicago remembering and embracing the importance of giving back, a lesson he learned from his parents and carried throughout his own life and to his children. This physician is Dr. Jim Reuler, a person and physician of extraordinary compassion, humility, empathy and dedication. Before medical school is over, most of you will volunteer at The Wallace Medical Concern, a non profit safety net clinic, knowing and learning the importance of giving back. This clinic was started by Dr. Reuler and because I know he would never share this story, I will share it. He envisioned a clinic which would complement activity already supported by other community sites in Portland for those less fortunate to receive the very basic needs of human beings, healthcare. One day Dr. Reuler received a call from the lawyer of a patient. I know you are thinking, this is not a good turn to the story but not all calls from lawyers are bad. The lawyer informed Dr. Reuler that a long time patient of his by the name of Mr. Wallace had left a small sum of money to him. Mr. Wallace was Dr. Reuler's patient who had died a year earlier but with whom he had developed a caring and therapeutic relationship with over time. Dr. Reuler was unsure how to best utilize the money until the full concept of a safety clinic was born. Mr. Wallace's contribution allowed Dr. Reuler and others to use the money to pay for lawyers (oh well) and other necessary documents to open a non profit clinic. When it came time to name the clinic, it was clear; Dr. Reuler honored the man who made the beginning happen, Mr. Wallace. The Wallace Medical Concern was born. Now you may be thinking I don't know if I could open a clinic or do something as large as this project. You don't have to. Remember, everyone can give in their way and as a medical student and eventually, physician, you will be afforded many opportunities to give to society.



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Will you remember the importance of social justice, our social responsibility as physicians? Will you remember beyond medical school the importance of helping those less fortunate? Will you remember to give back?

Will you remember your own wellness? You cannot fully accomplish the wonders of being a physician if you do not take care of yourself and feel thankful for the many important things in life. By being whole, you can provide more complete care to your patients as you embark on your journey. I read a story once excerpted from a presentation given at a medical meeting which encapsulates the importance of wellness and I want to share it with you though I don't know who the author is so I can't give proper attribution, though I sure wish I had thought of this story!

A professor stood before his philosophy class and had some items in front of him. When the class began, wordlessly, he picked up a very large and empty mayonnaise jar and proceeded to fill it with large stones. He then asked the students if the jar was full. They agreed it was. So the professor then picked up a box of pebbles and poured them into the jar. He shook the jar lightly. The pebbles rolled into the open areas between the large stones. He then asked the students again if the jar was full. They agreed it was. The professor next picked up a box of sand and poured it into the jar. Of course, the sand filled up everything else. He asked once more if the jar was full. The students responded with a unanimous yes. The professor then produced two cups of coffee from under the table and poured the entire contents into the jar effectively filling the empty spaces between the sand. The students laughed. "Now," said the professor, as the laughter subsided, "I want you to recognize that this jar represents your life. The stones are the important things—your family, your children, your health, your friends, your favorite passions—things that if everything else was lost and only they remained your life would still be full. The pebbles are the other things that matter like your job, your house, and your car. The sand is everything else—the small stuff. If you put the sand into the jar first," he continued, "there is no room for the pebbles or the stones. The same goes for life. If you spend your time and energy on the small stuff, you will never have room for the things that are



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important to you. Pay attention to the things that are critical to your happiness. Take care of the stones. The rest is just sand.” One of the students raised her hand and inquired about what the coffee represented. The professor smiled, “I’m glad you asked. It just goes to show no matter how full your life may seem, there is always room for a cup of coffee with a friend.”

Will you remember to feel thankful for where you are, where you have come from, and who supported you?

Will you remember to feel grateful for the many more people who will enrich your life from patients to colleagues to friends and mentors?

Conclusion:

Will you remember? Will you remember when you could have chosen five more minutes with your patient instead of leaving earlier to study for your next test? Will you remember to listen, truly listen to your patient’s story when you were ready to leave the room? Will you remember to be grateful for those who stood in the shadows and supported you, to the patients and colleagues who enrich you? Will you remember to give to your patient, your community, your society when it seemed easier to simply do something else? The white coat will give you status and power —two items I will tell you are completely meaningless in the life of a physician. The power of the white coat is when you remember your patients’ stories, your empathy, your gratitude, your humility, your self reflection, your social responsibility, your own wellness.

These are the secrets that will make you a truly great physician.

Thank you .



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