

It's not about you

Stethoscope Ceremony

23 August 2011

David McKnight

Welcome to our second U of T Stethoscope Ceremony. This whole week is designed to welcome you to the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto. Today, we want to welcome the new students to the PROFESSION of Medicine

First, I have some questions for the new students. Who has ever seen an episode of *House*? *Grey's Anatomy*? *Scrubs*?

I have sad news: this is real life and this is a real medical school. It's not *House* — brilliance (not that he is brilliant) is not an excuse for any behaviour. It's not *Grey's* — boundaries exist, and sex is not the primary motivator. It's not *Scrubs* — it will not be a farce (although there will be joyful as well as sad times.)

This is a real medical school. There are expectations. When you get to clinical rotations you will find that the term "Meets Expectations," has a very important meaning. And there will be Professional expectations, as well as knowledge based expectations.

Last year at this ceremony, I concentrated on two words that I think are at the core of professionalism: **TRUST** and **RESPECT**. **TRUST**: the importance of being worthy of the trust that your patients and colleagues, and even society will place in you as a physician. **RESPECT**: the importance that you show respect — respect for patients, respect for the team you work with, respect for yourself.

This year, I'd like to look at another aspect of being a professional and in entering a professional faculty. I'll summarize my point this way: "It's not about you."

In your recent studies, most of you have not been in professional faculties. Most have been in sciences, a few in other disciplines. The teaching programs in those faculties have a declared aim: to give students an excellent education and to help them achieve their goals of academic success. We have that goal too. You will find here excellent and dedicated faculty and staff who will do all they can to help you learn to be excellent physicians. But there is another goal, another purpose. Like all of the health care disciplines, our other goal is to ensure the continued excellent care of patients. We have a duty to the people of Mississauga and Toronto, of Ontario, of Canada, and even the world to ensure that in the future there will be superb doctors to care for them and their children. This is part of the contract that we all have with our society. You will be those doctors.

This week, many people will congratulate you on your success in reaching this step, in joining this class. I congratulate you. Many people will tell you that you have demonstrated your excellence in being chosen in the midst of strong competition for a place in this class. That is true. You are obviously bright and hard working and achievers. But that is not enough. You must always remember that it is never just about you. You are entering a profession where the needs of others must inform our actions. Sometimes that is called altruism. Altruism is often called one of the pillars of professionalism.

When a frightened parent brings a vomiting and lethargic infant to the emergency room in the middle of the night, that child's welfare comes first and the doctor gets out of bed. When a cardiologist's clinic is finished and she plans to go to a concert, that plan will be set aside for an urgent patient. There is an old debate about who is the most important person in the operating room. Is it the surgeon, the so-called "captain of the ship?" No: clearly the most important person in the operating room is the patient.

You will hear much about the so-called Doctor-Patient relationship. I prefer to call it the Patient-Doctor relationship; it puts things in the right order. For when we lose sight of the reason we take up medicine we lose the essence of what we do. It's not about us; it's about the patients.

STETHOSCOPE CEREMONY

So now we come to the stethoscope ceremony. As you know, some medical schools have a white coat ceremony for new students but there are some of us here who are uncomfortable with the white coat as a symbol of the profession. We fear that it emphasizes differences between the doctor and the patient. It can set doctors, and medical students, apart. It can be seen as elitist.

We have chosen the stethoscope as our symbol. It is only functional if there is a person at each end — and it is all about listening.

Throughout your career, remember the symbolism of the stethoscope: stay humble; listen; show respect — and remember: it's always about the patient.