

LSU Health Sciences Center Commencement Address

Saturday, May 18, 2002

Donald J. Palmisano, MD, JD

Good morning. I am honored to be with the distinguished class of 2002.

And congratulations! Commencement means you now begin the journey of your professional life. And what a journey it will be!

It doesn't seem that long ago that I was sitting exactly where you are now ... Oh, yes, it was at Tulane, but we are all friends and neighbors. In addition, one daughter is a graduate of LSU School of Dentistry and another is a Charity Hospital Nursing School graduate; Charity being our joint famous institution that binds all of us together! And now, to admit an additional truth – not just to you but to myself – I finished medical school 39 years ago, in 1963.

To give you an idea how long ago that was, 1963 was the year the cassette was introduced into America. Music was still on vinyl. And it wasn't the Beatles – Americans wouldn't know who they were for another year.

Consider the medical advances in just my professional career. In 1963, the Rubella vaccine was still six years away. The first commercial CAT scanner, nine years away. And recombinant DNA was 10 years away.

In medical school during the early 60's, there was one paragraph in my pediatric textbook for treatment of childhood leukemia – and it said the disease always was fatal.

Now the survival rate is over 70%.

Look at Lance Armstrong – who in 2001 won his third consecutive Tour de France 2,290 mile bicycle race, considered by many, as Lance puts it “the most grueling sporting event on the face of the earth.” He accomplished this amazing feat after recovering from treatment for metastatic testicular cancer that had spread to his abdomen, lungs, and brain. He's living testimony to the miracles of medical progress.

Yes, in 39 years as a physician, I have witnessed chemotherapy, complete intravenous nutritional support, organ transplantation, mechanical hearts, and more.

Imagine the advances you will reflect on 39 years from now.

I have been privileged to be a physician in the 20th Century and witness advances in Medicine that would appear to be miracles to our forefathers in Medicine if we could transport them from yesteryear to today. But now in this 21st Century, we stand on the threshold of even more dramatic changes.

I'm counting on you to unleash the unlimited creativity of the human mind to solve the mysteries of the human body and blaze new trails in the uncharted territories of the origin of life. Human genetics and The Human Genome Project are a major part of the excitement of the future. Imagine. Complete mapping of the human genome. The stuff of life. The double helix. The long stretch of DNA made up of discrete segments of genes coiled in the nucleus of the human cell.

Perhaps soon, genetically engineered viruses will carry normal versions of faulty genes. Consider that you may give an attenuated cold virus carrying a genetic patch to a young woman with cystic fibrosis. Shortly thereafter, she no longer suffers from cystic fibrosis. And there is more! Gene therapy for malignant tumors. The science fiction of yesterday is soon to be the reality of tomorrow.

This will be your journey. But I believe that how you make the journey is as important as the journey itself.

I remember the excitement I felt the day I received my medical degree. I remember where I was seated. I remember thinking this was it! I am now a doctor and what a wonderful opportunity is ahead to try to heal but always to comfort. I

remember the pride in my family and all of the sacrifices they made to allow me the opportunity to become a physician.

Some of you are physicians now. The rest are other medical and dental professionals and researchers and I know all of you feel the excitement and appreciation for loved ones who helped you reach this launching of your professional life. Today I use the term “Medicine” generically to encompass each discipline represented by the graduates today. The principles apply to all.

Thirty-nine years from now I believe you will retain the same excitement you have now. Oh, there always is the risk in any generation that we could sink into an abyss, a new Dark Age, a Dark Age of Medicine. But I don’t believe that will happen. I believe you will prevent that.

As you start your professional journey it is important to have a method of navigation – the equivalent of a North Star, a compass, a global positioning satellite system.

I believe that system can be remembered with the acronym SEC-C. Not SEXY -S-E-X-Y - but S-E-C-C.

And that stands for: Science – Ethics — Compassion – Courage.

These are the cornerstones for a foundation that will keep you true to your calling, the pursuit of knowledge and the translation of that knowledge into healing and comfort for your patients.

These four words tell you what you need to do, what you can do, and what you will do. When in doubt, return to them for your bearings, for hope, and for strength.

These four words will remind you, inspire you, and give you solace when you are alone with a patient who is slipping away to the beyond.

Remembering these four words, Science – Ethics – Compassion – Courage, and combining them with two sentences is your equivalent of the commandments of Medicine. The two sentences are:

- ◆ Is this in the patient’s best interest?
- ◆ Do I have my patient’s informed consent?

If you accomplish this, you will be true to your patient and to yourself.

Let’s look at each of these four words and two sentences.

In fact, let’s put them in the form of the six commandments of Medicine.

And the first is: Thou shall practice with science.

Every act in Medicine should be based on science. Do not experiment on patients with unproven treatments. If research is done, do it with strict ethical guidelines with a fully informed patient. Stay current and stay competent.

The second commandment is: Thou shall practice with ethics.

The practice of Medicine is a sacred trust. Patients put their lives into your hands. This is not by chance, but by trust for the medical profession built on centuries of individuals in the medical profession honoring that trust.

Do not be seduced by sex, money, or drugs. Opportunity abounds to be seduced and you must never yield to these temptations in your professional practice.

Always keep private the information told to you by your patient. Confidentiality is critical to trust. Without trust, patients won’t tell you what you need to know to diagnose and treat. The key to disclosure is the patient’s consent.

In any ethics debate, always ask how the decision was reached. What was the framework of ethical analysis? Different conclusions can be reached with different ethical models. I submit that the model that respects the autonomy of the patient you are treating and gets the patient's informed consent will be a good starting point in the debate.

The third commandment is: Thou shall practice with compassion.

The heartfelt concern for another's suffering accompanied by a desire to remove the pain and eliminate the cause is synonymous with a caring medical professional.

After a first meeting with you ... patients may have difficulty judging your competence ... but they are unerring in judging your compassion. Patients respond to compassion. In addition, they are very forgiving when you make an error if you are compassionate and truthful with them.

In the 17th Century, Joseph Addison wrote in *Campaign*:

Unbounded courage and compassion join'd,
Tempering each other in the victor's mind,
Alternately proclaim him good and great,
And make the hero and the man complete.

The same can be said for the great professional with the joining of compassion and courage.

The fourth commandment is: Thou shall practice with courage.

A sage by the name of Diogenes once saw a youth blushing, and said: "Courage, my boy! That is the complexion of virtue."—

Without courage, the other commandments have no support and will collapse. It takes courage to accomplish the rest. It takes courage to advocate for the patient's best interest when others try to intimidate you and try to rationalize forgetting the patient's best interest to save money for the insurance company, get a research grant, or a myriad of other possibilities.

Never forget that you are privileged to live in this great land of Liberty called America. Liberty is the absence of coercion. To fail to exercise your liberty on behalf of patients is dishonor to yourself, to the patients, and to those who gave their lives fighting to give you this land of Liberty. Never forget this. If honors, titles, or money bypass you because you remain true to your patients, do not regret but instead rejoice!

The fifth commandment is: Thou shall practice in the patient's best interest.

If you always remember that whatever you do should be in the patient's best interest – not the insurance company's ... not the hospital's – you will do fine. Don't fall prey to arguments that want you to sacrifice your patient for the generic population. You have the obligation to your patient. Honor it.

And the sixth commandment is: Thou shall practice with the patient's informed consent.

Give adequate disclosure to the patient in language he or she can understand. Be sure the patient has the opportunity to hear the potential advantages of the proposed treatment as well as the material risks, including the risk of foregoing treatment.

Give the patient time to reflect and answer the patient's questions. If you document this, the patient and you will be well served.

Because this is an intimate gathering ... I'll confess to you that I failed my first anatomy exam. I'll also confess to considering quitting medical school after that painful event.

But I'll always remember what my Dad told me. He said: "Do your homework, have courage, and don't give up." Good advice then and good advice now. Have hope for the future; offer hope to your patients; do this with enthusiasm and you too will be filled with joy 39 years from now.

Whenever I feel stressed or harried or challenged by the awesome responsibilities of being a physician, I remind myself of the great joys I have experienced as a physician.

I think of the time I was helping another surgeon operate on a young man injured in an auto accident. He was about 23 and was bleeding inside his abdomen. We got the bleeding stopped and then the patient's heart stopped as we were ending the operation despite restoring the lost blood and the anesthesiologist giving oxygen via the endotracheal tube. External massage was tried but did not restore the heartbeat. The anesthesiologist shook his head and said, "There is nothing more we can do. We must pronounce him dead."

At that moment, I was filled with disbelief that this young man was dead. Everything that was supposed to be done was done. I pulled back the drapes covering the patient's chest, splashed antiseptic on his chest and cut open his chest. I reached for his lifeless heart and began to squeeze it between my hands. I told the anesthesiologist to keep squeezing the breathing bag filled with oxygen. I could not leave that room without saying to myself that EVERYTHING possible had been done. Suddenly, between squeezes on the heart, I felt the heart start beating!

That young man recovered, became a talented engineer, and accomplished engineering feats all over the world. He frequently sent post cards to his surgeon from exotic places and thanked the surgeon I assisted for keeping him alive.

Dramatic events like this one may be rare ... but I've experienced countless joys during the normal course of this noble profession.

Such events will stay in your consciousness and bring joy to you when temporary obstacles threaten to overwhelm you. You will have similar stories and you will rejoice that you are a healer.

That famous author, Anonymous, once said:

This is the beginning of a new day. You have been given this day to use as you will.
You can waste it or use it for good.
What you do today is important because you are exchanging a day of your life for it.
When tomorrow comes, this day will be gone forever; in its place is something that you have left behind...let it be something good."

And one more from Anonymous to keep each day in perspective:

Work like you will live forever;
Play like you will die tomorrow;
Love like you have never been hurt;
Dance like no one is watching.

Carpe Diem! Seize the day! Seize the future. Create your destiny.

Now, laissez le bon temps rouler – let the good times roll!
Have a wonderful journey.
God bless you and your families, God bless America!

Donald J. Palmisano, MD, JD

Clinical Professor of Surgery and Medical Jurisprudence
Tulane University School of Medicine
E-mail: DJP@intrepidresources.com