

**Speech by Professor Tan Chorh Chuan
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Graduation Speaker, School of Medicine Diploma Ceremony
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“Leading Positive Change”

To the Class of 2011, my very heartiest congratulations!

I am very happy and honoured to join you on this special day, to applaud your achievements and celebrate with pride, your graduation from one of the world’s great medical schools.

The future that lies before you is full of promise and potential.

And what makes it especially exciting, are the myriad of opportunities for you to be a driver for positive change.

The training in medicine which you and I have received is a gift – a special gift that can help save lives, relieve suffering, and restore health. It empowers you, as you enter the world of practice, to touch and change the lives of the patients you serve.

For me, a small, but memorable example of this happened when my wife Evelyn and I were trekking in Tadjikistan in Central Asia, in 1996. We met a shepherd with a very bad pulp abscess of the finger. Evelyn is an Anaesthesiologist and I am a Nephrologist, but even then, both of us quickly agreed the abscess had to be drained. For anaesthesia, the only thing we had to give him was oral tramadol. His shepherd friends took a more traditional view and slipped him a big dose of vodka as well. I don't recommend this practice, but it did allow us to drain the abscess properly. This, together with a course of Azithromycin, set him off to a good recovery.

A small incident perhaps, but we were happy we could help avert a bad outcome for the shepherd.

As each of you embarks on your own journey as a physician, you will have many such satisfying moments. But your ability to forge positive change can go far beyond this.

I once asked Duke Chancellor for Medical Affairs, Dr Victor Dzau, this question:

What is the goal of Duke Medicine?

The first part of his reply was simple but profound: To give the best clinical care to our patients today AND to develop the new treatments that will be in the medical textbooks of the future.

This powerful idea recognises the vital need to continually transform medicine through research.

We have many fine examples of how this vision is being pursued in Duke Medicine today. We can also draw inspiration from Duke's rich history. For example, distinguished Duke faculty member Professor Gertude Elion overcame the prejudices against women during her time, pursued research in a wide range of areas and translated them into many new drug treatments. She received the Nobel Prize in 1988, together with James Black and George Hitchings "for their discoveries of important principles for drug treatment".

As an inspiring mentor to Duke students, Professor Elion said: "I think it's a very valuable thing for a doctor to learn how to do research, and to learn how to approach research. I think that a year spent in research is extremely valuable to them."

Having been immersed in this culture, I hope that many of you would go on to pursue research that will help shape the science and practice of medicine for the 21st century.

The medicine of the 21st century will very much be about the globalised world we live in.

The biology of diseases and their response to treatment, vary significantly in different populations of the world. As physicians, we have to be aware of these differences and integrate them into our practice.

As researchers, we can contribute to understanding the science behind these differences, and develop treatments better tailored to different populations.

This year, 2011, also marks the first graduating class of the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School. This partnership is driven by the common vision that both Duke and NUS share as global universities. It reflects our commitment to innovate education and research for a globalised world, where Asia will play a more prominent role.

This collaboration has been a great success. Despite being new, the School already stands out for its innovative teaching and the quality of its faculty, students and research. We believe that the School will make novel contributions as a model of global medical education, and a platform for joint research on vital health issues for Asia and the rest of the world.

Also relevant here is the second part of Chancellor Dzau's response to my question: What is the goal of Duke Medicine?

He envisioned that Duke Medicine should also help transform the health and medical care of whole populations, through a synergistic link between basic science research and its application to the community. Here again, there is strong congruence with NUS' own vision. Duke Medicine's pioneering work in public and global health can inform health policy and action that improves the lives of many in Asia and the rest of the world.

For the Class of 2011, you can make a big difference to individual patients. But for some of you, you can also contribute to improving health and health delivery for entire communities.

I still remember how I felt when I graduated from medical school in 1983. It was a mix of joy, relief and excitement, tinged with a slight edge of anxiety about the future. As it turned out, I was lucky that I was able to take up a series of interesting options in my career.

I had the chance to train as a physician-scientist at a time when this was a very new concept in Singapore. I could enjoy the challenge of re-thinking medical education through my involvement with the NUS Faculty of Medicine and the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School. I learnt a great deal about public health when I was responsible for Singapore's medical services. In fact, during the SARS epidemic in 2003, I had a real-life crash course in epidemic control.

Like me, you too will be presented with many attractive opportunities as your future unfolds. In fact, your challenge may be that you will have too many choices!

What I have learnt myself is this: choose not just with your head, but with your heart. And once you have made a choice, give it your very best. No matter what it is we elect to pursue, if we do so with commitment, imagination and courage, we can serve others well and find fulfilment in our work and lives.

Finally, the power to make positive change, comes with a great responsibility.

That responsibility is to maintain TRUST – trust between your patients and you, as a doctor; trust between society and the medical profession.

When I applied to study medicine more than 30 years ago, I was influenced by my mother. She felt I should do something of service to others and which was trusted by society. Over the years, I have found that most of the bright young people applying to medicine, were driven by the same motivations.

As our newest colleagues, you help keep ablaze the time-honored values of the medical profession, particularly the TRUST that is so central to our work and lives as doctors. This trust does not come automatically, it has to be nurtured and earned.

As you pursue your dreams, as you lead positive change in your work, I urge you to always keep in mind, your responsibility to upkeep the noble traditions of medicine, for the benefit of our patients and society.

Closing

For the graduating class of 2011, you can look to the future with excitement and anticipation.

As you step into a new world of great opportunity, you are well-placed to make a real difference:

The superb clinical and research training you have received,
your insistence on putting patients' interests at the heart of your work,
and the Duke culture of excellence, boldness and imagination.

All these will enable you, as proud graduates of Duke, to be a true force for positive change, to make a mark not just in medicine but in society, at large.

Congratulations and best wishes for a very bright future! Thank you.

Professor Tan Chorh Chuan had received an honorary Doctor of Science from Duke University at its 159th Commencement in Wallace Wade Stadium earlier in the day.