

OHSU SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

WHITE COAT CEREMONY

Dean Richardson's Welcome Remarks

August 19, 2011

**1 p.m., Newmark Theatre
Portland, Oregon**



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The White Coat: A symbol of balance

Thank you for the honor of speaking today.

Welcome everyone! I am pleased to see all of you here.

Our newest students and I met briefly during the start of their orientation sessions earlier this week, but this is the first time I have had the opportunity to welcome the families and friends of our newest class.

Thank you all for being here today as we celebrate the OHSU School of Medicine Class of 2015.

124 years ago we welcomed our first class to this medical school.

Back then, our school was located in a little grocery store building in NW Portland – it's long since been torn down.

Our entering class was 15 students.

A lot has changed – for the better during the past 124 years.

We are in new locations on Marquam Hill and Portland's South Waterfront, linked together by the Portland Aerial Tram and the streetcar.

We have many more buildings today – some of them quite nice and very modern – as well as those built near the turn of the 20th century which remind us of our rich history and just how far we have come.



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Since our beginnings in 1887, the OHSU School of Medicine has evolved into one of the world's leading academic health centers, recognized throughout the world for our important contributions to human health and well-being.

Our entering class this year is 128 students - all of you are deeply committed to health care and community service.

You are now joining the OHSU community. Our thousands of graduates practice far and wide, have cared for millions of patients and have made extraordinary contributions – and not only in medicine and science. They have become leaders in their communities. In fact, our Governor is an alumnus, Dr. John Kitzhaber.

And every one of these alumni physicians was once in exactly the same place as you are today.

Waiting to receive their first White Coat.

Like most of you, they were excited.

Like most of you, they were nervous.

Like most of you, they were proud to be in the place you occupy today.

I suspect that each one of those thousands of physicians would tell you that, looking back, this was a moment etched in their memory.



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From this moment onward, they changed in profound ways. Some of these changes were expected and could be planned for.

But other changes surprised and humbled them.

The four years ahead of you are like nothing you can imagine now.

- You will acquire knowledge that will allow you to become a healer.
- You will understand human anatomy and how the body creates and sustains life.
- You will learn to see beyond the skin, into the heart and through bones all the way down to the microscopic genetic and cellular mechanisms that regulate the human body.
- You will witness the effects of disease and trauma on the human body and you will learn how to reverse these effects.
- You will learn about the limits of our knowledge and hopefully will partner with scientists to find tomorrow's cures and treatments.

During the next four years, you will acquire the knowledge that is the basis of being a physician, but you will also discover that the sheer volume of knowledge you need, and the rate at which it advances, will require you to continue learning every day for the rest of your life.



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I have been a physician for more than thirty years and every single day I learn something new from my patients, from scientific advances, from my colleagues and from our students. I expect to learn from many of you as well.

Recently I asked some of our students what *they* would tell you about what surprised them and how they have changed during their journey to become a physician.

Andy, who just finished his first year, said “The work of medical school is unrelenting, and if you don’t stick to a schedule, it will overwhelm you.”

That’s good to remember. I can tell you it’s true.

Richard, who just finished his second year, said, “My base of expertise has changed. I feel like I can now answer detailed questions about a patient’s condition while also helping to cultivate a healing environment.”

Richard’s observation is important. As a student, you will have more time to spend with patients than faculty physicians do, more time now as a student than probably any other time in the future.

Rachel, entering her fourth year, said she is now able “to see and hear things when interacting with not only patients, but also friends, family and even complete strangers that you can link back to things you've seen in clinic and in the hospital.”



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During the next four years, you will acquire knowledge that only a privileged few attain.

Here's something Rachel said that surprised her; "I didn't expect that patients would put their trust in me from Day One."

This is a fact: total strangers will put their trust in you, and they will trust that your journey to becoming a physician was a calling, not just a career choice.

As you embrace this fact, you should feel a deeper sense of responsibility and compassion for humanity – even deeper than what I know you already feel.

Your charge – and your challenge – as a physician is to always ensure that your knowledge acquisition and sense of compassion remain in balance and that those patients have put their trust in the right person.

To me, the White Coat is a symbol of many things.

One of which is your commitment to knowledge and learning.

Another is understanding the responsibility that comes with knowing people instinctively trust you.

Inherent in that commitment and understanding is the need to earn the trust not only through knowledge but compassion and empathy as well.



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It is these characteristics that make the implicit trust deserved. It's a balance we all strive to attain: the knowledge of statistical outcomes and facts and the reality of the individual in front of you who needs recognition as a fellow human being.

Recognizing the need for that balance between knowledge and compassion, and experiencing the joy and satisfaction that comes with attaining that balance, is one way you will change these next four years.

This idea was recently articulated nicely in an award-winning essay about the White Coat ceremony by Randy Tang, a medical student in New Jersey.

He described the slowly dawning realization that sometimes he had to take off the White Coat.

He meant it literally – as he shared a story in which he had to remove the coat to make a connection with a dying patient, to see his patient as a human, not just another case, or another opportunity to learn. Over the next four years and beyond, as you begin to change and the full breadth of your responsibility as a physician becomes clearer to you, don't let the White Coat be a barrier to making a human connection with your patients.

Don't lose sight of the necessary commitment to the balance between medical expertise and human compassion.



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The White Coat is only a uniform if it represents only medical knowledge, when it is not partnered with compassion.

In these moments, I trust you will remember what it really means that the patient in front of you trusts you and needs you to understand their life path.

The White Coat you receive today is also proof that every one of you is an extraordinary individual and that you have excelled. Earn the trust that accompanies the symbol.

And today, as you don your first White Coat, you begin a journey that will change you forever in exciting and profound ways.

We are proud and privileged to take the journey with you as you become a physician.

I look forward to learning with you over the next four years.

Welcome to the OHSU School of Medicine.

Thank you.



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