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TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY



SACKLER SCHOOL  
OF MEDICINE

NEW YORK STATE  
PROGRAM

1981  
COMMENCEMENT  
ADDRESS

Joshua Lederberg, Ph.D., M.D. (Hon. C.)

COMMENCEMENT  
EXERCISES

June 5, 1981  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art  
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## COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

Joshua Lederberg, Ph.D.  
*President*  
*Rockefeller University*

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Thank you, Dr. Sackler.

Professor Serr, Mr. Tisch, honored guests, graduates, friends. The symbolism of this occasion is so staggering that it is difficult for me to explore all of its dimensions. That you have had two commencements, one of them 10,000 miles away, one here, both under the auspices of the University of the State of New York, symbolizes the shrinkage of the world and space and time that we are all familiar with in the abstract, but have few comparable examples so concretely in front of us.

No less important is the immediate locale for this occasion. As you walk through the halls leading to this auditorium—this was not a place selected at random, and there is no other place like this—you saw, amongst other things, the representation of the very founding of our common civilization in the art and expression and monuments of the ancient Egyptian and Assyrian and Greek and every other ancient culture on which our own concept of man in the universe is, in fact, founded.

And then we find, even more remarkably, that there is one actor in the shrinkage of this universe that we now experience in common, and his name is Sackler. And what an extraordinary source of the homage that I wish to pay. That is, there are other important emblematic aspects of this occasion, some that Dr. Sackler had no way of knowing: that my father was born in a small, but ancient seaport town called Yafo. His family was amongst the pioneers that founded the city of Tel Aviv. I will not go into the saga that leads to my being here at the present occasion. I can only say that it would have hardly been possible to find an occasion of more pride on my own father's part, were he living today, than to be able to observe this particular occasion.



You are here now being conferred the privileges, dignities, immunities, and responsibilities that go along with the Doctorate of Medicine. For most of you, for all of you, this has been a thrilling challenge. I would have enjoyed being with you at the time that you knew that you were admitted to the school and knew you were well launched on your present careers. There were times when, working as dogs, as you indeed were, it would have been a little less pleasant to be in your immediate company, but you have worked very hard, and you have certainly earned every one of the privileges and immunities that are shortly to be conferred. The responsibilities I think you are all very familiar with. You will take an oath which embodies many of them.

But I wonder how profoundly you have examined what courage is involved in entering into the career of this profession at the present time in world history. On the one hand, as Professor Serr indicated, there has never been a more exciting range of opportunities for the application of the highest technology, both physical and biochemical, that give one the power to intervene in the direction and survivability of human life, and this can only expand in the near future. At the same time, this arouses enormous expectations on the part of the people who will be your patients and clients, one by one. And we now have the paradox that you must wonder of your next patient whom you treat, and whom you offer the best that your own skills have to offer, whether he will not bring you to court the next day in a malpractice action. That paradox of the relationship of physician and patient, not unconnected with the very great power that is in the hand of the physician, is a matter that one must contemplate with concern, as it underlines the very texture of those relationships between patient and physician. There's not a great deal that we can do about that except to ensure that, in your own individual practice, you really follow it to the utmost standards of both ethics and of knowledge of what your profession has to offer, and that you relate to the patients that you deal with as human beings.

It has often been said, a person who knows his doctor on a personal, one-to-one basis, very rarely files suit against him. This is not just a small side issue, it is not just a small nuisance or harassment in the practice of medicine. It has come to be involved at the very core of day-to-day practice. The ambiguities of what was once an unquestioned and untrampled offering of service in the most dedicated way is one of the most important issues that you will have to face, on both a very practical level and also in your own self-definition with respect to the careers you follow.



You have had an extraordinary beginning. Again, it staggers the mind to think of what went into the possibility of your having two commencements, in Tel Aviv and in New York. For the next few years, you still have open to you a wide variety of decisions. One that may seem still very, very difficult, and is certainly the most taxing in terms of its intellectual demands and exhausting effort, is your continued development in the sub-specialities of medicine.

But, in a certain sense, that is the easy path because the way is laid out before you. You have a clear idea of exactly what you must do during your residency and further sub-specialty training. You have a pretty clear idea, at least in the contemporary social context, of what will be expected of you and what the rewards will be for the successful accomplishment of those tasks. It is certainly a noble tradition. It is one that is very rewarding and highly regarded, on the one hand, and of course, arouses all of the ambiguities that I have mentioned, on the other.

But if one reflects on the most important challenges that face the human condition today, the places where the deepest knowledge of the health sciences will have the highest impact on the welfare of the largest number of people, one wonders if that is the only path. And I have a small venture in bringing this up to you. I feel that with your very special background and the very special nature of these circumstances, that you will know that there are many other aspects to the health of the larger number of people than are reflected in the specialties that you will continue, in the context of a high order of technologically-based medicine, as practiced in this country.

You, more than most, should know that malaria is the world's most important disease, that we still lack many of the scientific and technological foundations in order to properly cope with this. Swatting mosquitoes is really not going to be, in the long run, a very effective program, and even those people who talk about "eradicating" malaria betray their ignorance of the complexity of a world eco-system, to use that kind of phrase. It is borrowed unthinkingly from the successful eradication of smallpox and a few other very unusual circumstances.



Worm infections probably account for more misery, but not lethality, than almost any other source of disease that can be identified. And they are happily not an important part of our national problem here, although not totally absent. And, again, we probably do not have yet a sufficient scientific base to deal properly with these conditions, although much could be done with the application of an elementary level of hygiene that you, as physicians, would have known about in the very first few months of your medical education, but which is extraordinarily difficult to transfer in practice to large numbers of people—a variety of people that you have had a particular opportunity to observe, in contrast to many of the students of our traditional (what a phrase, traditional!) schools of medicine in this country.

We can turn even to conditions like tuberculosis and leprosy and the enteric infections of young children, where we know what can be done there; and what a disgrace it is that those diseases are still so prevalent in so many parts of the world where we have at least half-way measures with respect to the scientific and technical base.

Well, my challenge to you is in the further pursuit of your careers—what attention you will be able to pay to the variety of paths that lay ahead of you. There are ways in which a preoccupation with each of these problems is highly interdigitated with the most advanced of the sub-specialities and of their technologies. One cannot draw a sharp and clear line between different levels and stages of inquiry or of practice. And I put it to you that, amongst your special privileges and immunities, with the very particular world-embracing background of your education, that you have both a special knowledge and a special responsibility and a special opportunity to be physicians to the world, more than any others likely to be graduated at the present time.

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