



Arizona School of Dentistry & Oral Health Commencement Ceremony

May 19, 2007
Mesa, Arizona

A Call to Serve

by

Charles W. Grim, D.D.S., M.H.S.A.
Assistant Surgeon General
Director, Indian Health Service

I am deeply honored to be here today to accept this honorary degree. It means a great deal to me to be recognized by such a visionary program devoted to helping underserved communities, especially American Indian and Alaska Native communities. Thank you so much.

As the first graduating class of the Arizona School of Dentistry and Oral Health, you have much to be proud of in your choice of schools and your demonstrated desire to help others. You were selected for this program in large measure because of your community service work and your obvious desire to give back to our society in the future. That's an awesome combination!

I especially congratulate and challenge you as you embark on new careers as oral health care providers. Where you decide to practice your new skills will have a profound and positive effect on individual patients and whole communities.

As the Director of the Indian Health Service, a dentist, and as a member of the Cherokee Nation, I can tell you that this new school and its mission mean a great deal to me as well as to the entire IHS. Our need for dentists within the IHS has grown to a 33 percent vacancy rate from the 23 percent rate that existed at the inception of this school in 2003. In fact, this distressing void of dentists to serve Indian communities was a major factor in the establishment of the Arizona School of Dentistry and Oral Health. I know there is a lot of gratitude throughout Indian Country for this commitment to address our serious problem.

The text is the basis of Dr. Grim's oral remarks at the Arizona School of Dentistry and Oral Health's Commencement Exercise on May 19, 2007. It should be used with the understanding that some material may have been added or omitted during presentation.

Despite the concerted and sometimes heroic efforts of our IHS dental recruitment program, particularly Dr. Tim Lozon, to reduce and eliminate this high vacancy rate, it remains stubbornly high. For those of you who haven't made career commitments yet, I urge you to take a look at the IHS dental jobs with opportunity, adventure, and purpose that exist in 35 states from Alaska to Florida. Our scholarship program and other incentives are worth taking a look. Details are available in the dental category on the IHS website.

During our 52 years as a federal agency, the Indian Health Service has significantly elevated the health status of American Indians and Alaska Natives. We have many daunting challenges ahead, but our steady progress and innovative approaches give us great hope for more major gains in health and wellness indicators. I sincerely hope some of you will consider joining us in this challenge through a career with the Indian Health Service.

As I said at the beginning of my remarks, I am passionate about the value of our work as public health professionals. Protecting the health and safety of communities, healing the sick, and tending to the needs of the poor and elderly all bring immeasurable job satisfaction and a strong sense of giving back. Your careers are just starting, but remember that you have within your grasp the rare combination of opportunity and ability to make a significant difference in our society and our world.

* * *