

Introduction to Commencement speeches -- 1988

All of the time I was Surgeon General and ever since, I have had repeated invitations to give commencement addresses in all types of venues. The time of a commencement address is a wonderful time for a Surgeon General's message to reach a particular class of people at a particularly important time of their lives. Therefore, I accepted many of these invitations because of that opportunity. Some commencement addresses come with an honorary degree and as of the time of this writing I have accumulated 41 of them, but that was not my reason for accepting the invitations. Just so the user won't think that I'm a collector of honorary degrees, let me say that in the of spring 1990, the first spring after I left my second term as Surgeon General, I turned down 30 invitations to accept an honorary degree.

In the fall of 1987 and the spring of 1988, six special opportunities arose. Each was at a school of medicine and it occurred to me that I could accomplish their purposes, as well as my own, while I was in public office, much better than I could at any other time of my life. Therefore, I elected to accept six invitations and made up my mind that I would address aspects of major concerns of mine: "Ethical Imperatives of the Young Physician". The first one chronologically was at the F. Edward Hebert School of Medicine of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Bethesda, Maryland. I chose there to speak on the "Challenge of Medical Practice". The second was to the Albany Medical College (held at Saratoga Springs, New York) on the subject of the "Physician-Patient Relationship". The third was to the graduating class of Baylor Medical College in Houston, Texas and the subject was "Responding to the Handicapped Patient". The fourth was presented to the Graduating Class of Kirksville College of Osteopathic Medicine, Kirksville, Missouri and the title was "Responding to the Aging Patient". The fifth was presented before the Class Day Exercises, presented the day preceding commencement of the entire University, to the Harvard Medical School in Boston, Massachusetts on the subject of "Responding to the Patient with AIDS". And the sixth and last was to the University of Health Sciences/Chicago Medical School in Chicago, Illinois on the subject of "Responding to the Patients of Tomorrow".

Unique opportunity, I thought, that this presented was not only to address each of these classes on an important subject that they should be aware of for their future, but it would be possible for me to have all six commencement addresses bound in a simple volume and make a presentation during the following summer to every one of the medical students in all six graduating classes.

This was quite an undertaking, but with the help of my special assistant and speechwriter, Theodore Cron, the project was completed and we did send to each graduate of the six medical schools, a bound volume in the summer of 1988.

The opening and the closing of each lecture was the same. Sandwiched between these was a different message for each class. I made a special effort to explain at the beginning of each lecture what I have just described here including the fact that each student would receive during the summer a bound volume of all six lectures at a particular time in their careers when such an ethical collection might be important. I've always been pleased I didn't choose to talk about etiquette, because out of those approximately eight hundred students, I never saw a thank you

from anyone, and although my mail was voluminous and it's possible I might miss a piece here and there, the system was pretty efficient.

These were not the only commencement addresses I gave that spring. I also gave addresses at Colby Sawyer College in New London, New Hampshire; the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and Science in Philadelphia; Colby College, Waterville, Maine; the North Shore Country Day School in Winnetka, Illinois; and spoke at the Centennial of the Minnesota Medical School.