

2020 Commencement Address
Michael F. Collins, MD
Chancellor, University of Massachusetts Medical School
March 31, 2020

I remember your very first day of medical school.

There was great enthusiasm; some nerves, too. Each of you had worked so hard to realize a dream. And now, it was playing out before you.

That day, in your very first medical school lecture, I recalled a scene that all who join our profession experiences countless times during their career: the moment when a physician enters a patient's room. I emphasized that it is not privilege for a patient to be cared for by a physician, but a privilege for a physician to care for their patients. And yes, I encouraged you then, as I do now, and will always, to hold the hand of your patients with esteem.

Later that day, sharing the same story with many of your parents, some wiped away tears of joy; others tears of parental pride, as gently, I let them know that their relationship with you would forever be changed, now that you were to become a physician.

On your first day of your medical school, none of us could have imagined how unusual this graduation day would become!

Unless one had just finished Albert Camus's, *The Plague*, or Bill Gates' 2015 Shattuck Lecture, thoughts of a pandemic were the furthest things from your minds that day! Most of you envisioned the white coats that you would soon wear, lectures, late nights, clinical rotations, and in not so long a time, that you would march onto the campus green and into the commencement tent basking in the cheers of family and friends.

How we wish that it could be that way!

At this moment, the cheers for your dreams now fulfilled, are deafened by the solitude and seriousness that surround this moment. You are gathered, if such a word could be used, in ones and twos, some with families near, others watching from afar, as the festivity of the moment is silenced into solemnity by a virus uncontained.

This was not how it was meant to be!

In 1943, college graduates never saw their commencement stage, as they were hurried off to serve their nation in a conflict that would test the mettle of individuals, nations and the world.

Never did we think this could happen again!

The ruffles and flourishes of commencement dreams are absent. The green is empty and still. We are separated from those we love. But our spirit must not be dashed!

As individuals and as citizens of this nation and the world, this moment implores us to focus on what is most important.

We have isolated ourselves to combat a virus whose vaccine has yet to be created.

We have moved to virtual relationships to deter a disease for which treatment has yet to be discovered.

We have made sacrifices to help those who might not be able to help themselves, while preparing to care for those who are ill.

As Camus sets the scene in *The Plague*, Dr. Rieux, Oran's young physician, recognizes disease could overwhelm his village. Camus writes: "I have no idea what's awaiting me, or what will happen when all this ends. For the moment I know this: there are sick people and they need curing."

How poignant that a philosophical tale that recounts a plague of the mid 1800s could presage today's pandemic.

Know how proud we are that you are the young physicians of this moment!

Soon, you will raise your hands and take the oath that your class has written. You will pledge to put others above yourselves. You will commit to those most in need, at a time when they need you most. You will vow to step forward, when stepping aside is not an option.

Please remember that in the days ahead, you will draw upon all you have learned. Never waver from a commitment to lifelong learning as there will be much to master in the days and years ahead.

With time, you will tell your children and grandchildren that on the day you graduated from medical school, you were called into service to care for patients with a contagious disease for which there was no cure. You will go on to regale them with the discoveries that were made and how they are now safe because a vaccine and treatments were discovered.

Tell those tales with equal parts of pride and humility; for our noble profession benefits most when we are humble in our achievements and modest with our accomplishments.

Throughout your career, never let the mask, gown or gloves come between you and those for whom it will be your privilege to care. There will be moments when all therapeutic options for your patients have been exhausted; please remember that the greatest privilege of your career may be the time you will spend holding the hand of your patient. These will be moments that comfort those for whom you care and sustain you in our profession.

Please know of the care and concern that we took when making the decision to move forward the date of your commencement. It weighs on me that you shall now step forward to care for those with a most contagious disease during a time of great uncertainty. My confidence in you, in your compassion and in your abilities, both reflects and confirms my confidence in our faculty, the stewards of your education.

The experiences you will encounter and the decisions that you will make in the days ahead shall be with you for a lifetime.

During the trying and triumphant moments of your career, please know of the enduring pride the University of Massachusetts Medical School shall have in calling you one of our own!

Congratulations and Godspeed along your professional journey!