

**Victor Dzau, MD, president of the Institute of Medicine, address to UMass Medical School
Commencement 2015**

Thank you all for the kind introduction. Thank you especially to Chancellor Collins, President Caret, and all of the faculty and staff for inviting me to be with you today. It is an honor to be here with you, Ms. Coenraads, and the students and families in such a festive atmosphere.

Congratulations to you all. To the students, to the parents and families who have offered their support, encouragement, inspiration, and guidance, to everyone who came here today to celebrate the tremendous achievements of your loved ones—you should be very proud of all that you have accomplished over the past few years.

It is a great privilege for me to be here today. I have strong personal ties to Massachusetts and called it my home for many years. It is wonderful to be back, speaking to a class of people who I hear are extremely dedicated to this state and community. I have watched this university thrive under the leadership of Chancellor Collins over the past seven years and it is fantastic to see the school as a prominent leader in both the science and service of health.

Graduates, you have picked a tremendously exciting time to start a career in the health professions. The advances in science and technology in just the past decade are unprecedented. We know things about our biology that we couldn't have dreamed of knowing before. We now have clinical programs that use the tracking of cell phone and social media patterns to detect early signs of mental illness and then alert health professionals. We have lasers that can remove tumors without incisions and we are on the cusp of being able to regenerate heart tissue. The tools you'll be working with sometimes sound like science fiction. But they're not. They will be yours, at your disposal to bring about better health for your patients.

What's more, our health knowledge is expanding beyond the limits of technology and clinic walls. We now know that social and economic factors such as supportive jobs, a good education, strong relationships, and a sense of meaning in our lives are essential to individual and community health. We're learning better ways of working in our neighborhoods to truly understand what health actually means to different people. This expanded perspective of health will enable us to develop health care that is truly *for* the people and *by* the people.

Your generation should be filled with hope for the future. Our healthcare system is changing rapidly and you will be the ones in the thick of things, steering the system in the right direction.

So today, with great optimism, we celebrate your milestone achievement. But at the same time, we all know there is work still to be done **Let us not forget the less fortunate** who are suffering from the ravages of the earthquakes in Nepal, from the deaths and devastation of the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, from being driven out of or tortured in their homelands. Here in the US, we cannot forget the families still rebuilding after Katrina and Sandy, the parents who have lost their children to violence, or the social and health inequities that have been brought to light in places like Baltimore or Ferguson.

The current images of suffering I see in the news bring back vivid, haunting memories of my work in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake. I organized seven teams of healthcare workers from Duke University to join Paul Farmer and Partners in Health to provide emergency care to those in need. I will never forget what I saw there. The landscape was a horrible mess of buildings in ruins. At one point I walked past a

nursing school that was completely collapsed. More than a hundred nurses had died and many were still buried under the rubble. Fields of tents were filled with people who had no place to live and makeshift hospitals were overwhelmed with the injured and sick. In a situation like this, it's nearly impossible to believe that over time, things would improve. But they did. Life does move on. People and communities heal and homes are being rebuilt.

However, it seems that just when the memories of suffering from one devastation begin to fade, we're hit elsewhere with another disaster. It's disheartening, but there is not much we can do to prevent these natural disasters.

On the other hand, there is plenty of suffering that *can* be avoided. Disease outbreaks and epidemics such as the Ebola outbreak can be prevented or better controlled. The violence that ravishes some parts of the world, including in our own country, can be stopped. The inequities that are revealed in any crisis can be reduced.

I believe we have a better chance of alleviating suffering if we can all stay true to our core professional values. When we stray from them, we often start to see things go wrong. But if we stick to them, I know that we will find our life and careers fulfilling. Our patients and indeed all of society will benefit.

So what are these values? Well, they boil down to three things.

First, remember your commitment to service, and that this service often comes with sacrifice. I know this value is central to you at UMass— in 2008 you were the first institution to receive a medical school-only Carnegie Community Engagement Classification. I've heard how you volunteer here in Worcester clinics and open your labs to high school students. I've heard about your programs in Liberia and the Dominican Republic, your training exchanges and technical assistance, your world-wide research that addresses health issues within and outside of the US. I also learned of your important work with Ebola through the Academic Consortium Combating Ebola in Liberia (ACCEL).

Imagine if more people everywhere had this attitude? What kind of world would we live in if service were at the front of our minds rather than status, money, or power?

Martin Luther King Junior once said: "Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals."

Throughout the Ebola crisis – among many others -- I have been blown away by the people who step up when called, who manage to put fear or personal comfort on the back burner when the world asks them to give something bigger.

Volunteers from Medecins Sans Frontiers were among the first to arrive in West Africa during the Ebola outbreak. They knew their lives were at risk, yet that did not stop people from volunteering. Indeed, 28 MSF volunteers contracted Ebola and 14 of them lost their lives. And yet, more volunteers came from all corners of the globe, working tirelessly for long hours and under tense and uncertain conditions.

The crisis highlighted the incredible local commitment of West African health workers and village healers. These brave souls comforted their afflicted neighbors, cared for the sick, and tried to bring healing to remote villages forgotten by the rest of the world. When they saw the need to build trust with

those who were suspicious of the health care system, they left their full-body protective gear behind. I am sure they were afraid every single day they went to work, yet their fear didn't stop them. And they paid dearly for their compassion. Over 500 local health care workers in Sierra Leone, Guinea, Liberia, and Nigeria have died from the virus they contracted while caring for others.

I was truly moved by your work in Ebola through the ACCEL. I am blown away by how many of you jumped up and pitched in to help the cause, through working in Ebola treatment units or district hospitals, providing lab support, coordinating logistics, managing the program, donating or raising money, and educating the public. I would like to applaud all of you for your commitment to helping your global neighbors—whether you went to Liberia or helped with the efforts here. Really, you should be so proud.

I know you've also worked with the West African diaspora as they join hands to support their home countries. They've raised money, sent supplies, and offered insight and guidance on the response and the nuances of working in their countries.

All of these recent tragedies have shown us the incredible empathy, sacrifice, and love that humans are capable of. They have shown us that the generosity of the human spirit knows no bounds.

They have shown us that, as Martin Luther King Jr suggested, success takes effort, service, and the willingness to sacrifice. If all of you are all willing to live by this value in what you do every day -- by sacrificing for your patients, placing their interests ahead of your own and remembering your commitment to service-- I believe we have a great future ahead.

The second value is to respect each person and be sensitive to the culture they come from. As health professionals, we often focus on the individual, alone, in a check-up room or as a study subject. But we all know from personal experience that in fact patients are deeply impacted and influenced by their relationships. Indeed, each individual is actually made of a complex fabric of history, culture, and surprise.

If we don't practice with humility, genuine curiosity about others, and sensitivity to differences in gender, ethnicity and culture, we will never earn the trust of people that we serve. I'm not just saying that because it sounds politically correct. History has shown us time and time again that when we don't take this to heart, we fail.

The Ebola crisis is a stark example of what happens when one misunderstands culture and fails to recognize that the way that humans love and comfort each other in difficult times vary greatly between cultures.

We as health professionals tend to treat only the biological side of the patient. We sometimes forget about the human side – the mother who loves her dying child so much that nothing can stop her from holding his virus-laden body. Or the pain a husband feels when he is told not to touch his infected wife as she is taken off to the hospital. We forget how much people crave community – especially during hard times – and how this craving can override even the most frightening public health warnings.

In West Africa, when cultural or spiritual beliefs were overlooked, disregarded or unaddressed, the medical response backfired. Trust was severed, and Ebola spread. As Gary Gunderson, the VP of Faith

and Health at the Wake Forest Medical Center says, “Change moves at the speed of trust,” and as we too often forget, trust doesn’t come naturally. It takes time and effort to build.

I recently heard a story about a prominent village healer in West Africa who died of Ebola. She was one of the earlier cases. When she died, her friends and family bathed her, caressed her, and clothed her properly, preparing her body in the way that they knew would maintain the natural and spiritual order of things. Over 1,000 people came to her funeral. But unfortunately, that was when the disease spread out of control to many people who came to mourn her death. Indeed, unsafe burials were a major contributor to the spread of the disease.

How could these deeply held beliefs about burial rites be respected while conforming to good public health practice? In one instance, a Cameroonian anthropologist worked with village spiritual guides to identify the rituals that can be practiced to make reparations with the spirits when proper burial couldn’t occur. The community has since changed how they mourn the dead. And that is when they began to reduce the spread of infection.

Humbly respecting each person’s culture and community isn’t just key after a disaster or in care delivered overseas. It applies to your daily practice here, as well. If, as health professionals, we are going to aspire to serve others, we must try to know them for who they are. We live in an increasingly diverse country. Recent demographic statistics show that the Hispanic population is expanding rapidly, and other racial and ethnic groups are also on the rise. Indeed America is a true melting pot. Just look around you... And look at me- an immigrant from China. In your practice, unless you understand your patient’s culture and traditions, you may not be aware of certain practices and diets that may interfere with the effectiveness of the medication and your treatment regimen. Therefore, it’s important that you know your patients, be culturally sensitive and work with them to give them the care that helps make their lives healthier while respecting their background.

The third value is that we need to work together, within and beyond our own professions.

This sounds simple, but disasters are great reminders that we’re not very good at it. When Ebola broke out, needless lives were lost because the international response wasn’t fast or coordinated enough. We didn’t have the right relationships in place that would have allowed us to mobilize resources quickly and efficiently.

“Relationship building” is too often considered fluff, something that is done only when other urgent needs aren’t demanding our attention. But if we had spent more time building relationships before the earthquakes or hurricanes or outbreaks struck, I can assure you that more people would be alive with their families today.

These relationships matter – whether you’re responding to a crisis or just doing your daily job. Each day, you will have the choice to reach out to your team or to only try to do things your way. Often it is easier to give help than to ask for and receive it, and asking for ideas from other takes great humility. We know, though, that the best care is when pharmacists, social workers, PAs, nurses, doctors, and researchers work as a team with the patient at the center. There is an African proverb I like that says, “If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.”

If we can all truly commit to these three values— to service and sacrifice, to respect for people and their cultures, to the need to work together—then I think we can, piece by piece, build the just world that we are striving for, in Liberia, or Durham, NC, or Worcester, MA.

Living by these values will prepare you to handle nobly whatever comes your way, whether you're responding to a crisis or building the care systems that will keep us from having crises in the first place.

For example, at the Institute of Medicine, we asked ourselves how we can be of best service as a global health policy institution. Our strengths are convening the best minds in health and medicine to develop evidence-based recommendations. Accordingly, we are convening a group of global experts to develop a comprehensive global preparedness plan to deal effectively with future outbreaks and medical disasters anywhere, and to ensure that when another outbreak does occur it will not have the same devastating effects as Ebola.

When you go off to *your* next position, whatever you do, remember to use your resources, your position, and your influence to ensure more justice and equity in our world.

Today you have taken an oath and made a commitment to the principles and values of your profession. Let them guide you throughout your entire careers, and I promise you, you can't go wrong. As you pick up new work and projects and responsibilities, ask yourself: "Am I taking this action because of my commitment to service or because of my ego? Am I respecting people around me for who they are rather than who I want them to be? Have I asked enough people for help?" If the answer to these questions is YES, then you know you're on the right road. As health providers and scientists you have the skills, knowledge, and resources to play a very significant role daily in alleviating needless suffering and inequity and I'm excited to see how you will do it in your career.

Congratulations again to you all, and thank you for committing to a great and meaningful life of service.