



2018 WHITE COAT REMARKS
DEAN DENNIS S. CHARNEY, MD

2018 WHITE COAT CEREMONY

Class of 2022 Dare Greatly to TREAT, to DISCOVER, and to CARE for those who need it most

Dennis S. Charney, MD, Anne and Joel Ehrenkranz Dean of the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai and President for Academic Affairs of the Mount Sinai Health System, delivered the following remarks at the 21st Annual White Coat Ceremony on September 13, 2018, in Stern Auditorium.

The White Coat Ceremony marks the beginning of the academic year and welcomes first-year students into the medical profession. As students are helped into their white coats by faculty, they are reminded of the significance of their profession and their responsibility to balance scientific knowledge with compassion.

Welcome to our annual White Coat Ceremony.

The presentation of the White Coat to our medical students, at the onset of their training, is symbolic of starting the journey from medical student to physician.

THE CLASS OF 2022

Class of 2022, you are among the most talented medical school classes in the world. You come to Mount Sinai from top undergraduate colleges and universities and have GPAs (3.84) and MCAT scores as high as any other students in the nation. But you are much more than that. It is not the academic accolades that convince me you have it in you, to change the world. It is the fire in your eyes and compassion in your heart, that tells me how much you can accomplish. Your achievements, to date, go beyond your commitment to medicine, and reveal the content of your character and your unique talents.

Your Class is diverse intellectually, with college majors in the sciences that include evolutionary biology, molecular biology, mathematics, chemistry, computer science, neuroscience, psychology, anthropology, economics, and political science. You have also majored in the humanities, including history, art, Italian literature, the classics, French, Asian and African American studies.

You are dancers, musicians, opera singers, photographers, yoga instructors, poets, a glass blower, an auto mechanic, and college athletes in football, softball, rowing, hockey, soccer, tennis and swimming. You have an alpine ski racer and scuba divers among you.

One of you served as a combat medic in the United States Army for years and another was recently commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the United States Air Force.

Many of you have done groundbreaking research in cancer, heart disease, infectious disease, and brain diseases among other conditions.

You are committed to social justice. Some of you became motivated to become physicians based upon illness in your family. And some of you have compelling personal stories of resilience, that I would love to hear more about.

This ceremony is important because it provides us the opportunity to reflect on what it means to don the white coat and join the order of physicians.

I can tell you, that it does NOT symbolize, an induction into a class of elite academics.

Rather, because an education at Mount Sinai is a great privilege, it comes with serious responsibilities.

Today, with these, my welcoming words to you, I wish to speak about some of those most important obligations.

THE WORK AHEAD

The world in which you are about to immerse yourself hungers for new ideas and solutions. We need a more complete understanding of the human body. We need breakthroughs in our ability to fight disease, alleviate suffering, and achieve meaningful social justice. In other words, we need answers to many urgent and long-standing questions that bear on the lives of our patients.

With the support of your teachers, you will tackle this important work at Mount Sinai. The experiences you have here will shape the rest of your lives, and you will have opportunities that most people only dream of.

As I mentioned, many of you decided to become physicians because of illnesses suffered by members of your own families such as cancer, heart disease, infectious disease, neurological and psychiatric illnesses, and others.

This is true for my own family as well.... I lost a grandchild to a rare genetic disease, and in the last six months I lost an aunt, who was like a sister to me, to a rapidly progressive form of lung cancer, and my mother, who had dementia which was unresponsive to any treatment.

THE FEW

This is my view. There are a relatively small number of medical school classes in the United States, or even the world, that have your ability and the available resources to become the next generation of brilliant physicians, transformative scientists, leaders, that will shape the future of medical education, biomedical research, and the delivery of high quality medical care to all Americans.

Class of 2022, there are only 140 of you. Yet, there are so many patients in our local community, our city, our country, and our world that are going to need you.

For me, it brings to mind the famous Winston Churchill speech to the House of Commons on August 20, 1940 during the Battle of Britain, when he referred to the Royal Air Force in the following way

*"Never in the field of human conflict was so much
owed by so many to so few"*

The pilots who fought in the battle have become known as THE FEW ever since.

So, you are going to be among THE FEW who must change the field of medicine.

BECOMING A PHYSICIAN

As you train to become an outstanding physician, I suggest you keep in mind these five pillars of practice, articulated by legendary Massachusetts General Hospital cardiologist, Roman W. DeSanctis, MD.

“There is one common thread that links them: the singular importance of the patient – the man, woman, girl or boy – that has entrusted you with their care and, often, their lives. First, the patient should always come first in the life of a doctor. Second, in any situation, and at any time, weigh all of the information in hand and always try to do that which is best for your patient. Third, as the Golden Rule applies in life, so it applies in the practice of medicine. “The patient should be managed the way the doctor or a member of his/her family, would wish to be treated if he/she were that patient, in that bed, at that time.” Fourth, be a friend to your patients, as well as a caregiver. And fifth, always demonstrate your humanity with honesty, sincerity and empathy. And as Peabody suggested, “One of the central qualities for clinicians is an interest in humanity, for the secret of the care of the patient, is in caring for the patient.”

You should never forget that the Beauty and Essence of medicine still lies in the Personal and Precious interactions between us and the patients we serve.

To become a transformative scientist, you are going to have to be bold

- To challenge convention
- To take risks and learn from failure
- Your goal must be to make discoveries that allow those that die today to live tomorrow

LEADERSHIP

And, what will it take to become a leader of the next generation of physicians and scientists?

Do the times make the leader, or does the leader shape the times? How can a leader infuse people's lives with a sense of purpose and meaning?

Resilience and a powerful emotional intelligence is the foundation of great leadership. Coupling these traits with empathy, humility, consistency, self-awareness, self-discipline, and generosity of spirit is indispensable to becoming a transformative leader.¹

LIFE AS A PHYSICIAN AND SCIENTIST

There is no doubt that becoming a physician and scientist is stressful.

- Patients will come to you during crises in their lives and ask you for answers. Sometimes the answers are not forthcoming.
- You will be expected to stitch up, both mentally and physically, the victims of adversity.
- You will be the one that is expected to make sacrifices, when hard times fall on your own life. Family members will look to you as a pillar of strength.
- Yes, being a doctor is tough.

Yet, let me also be among the first to tell you, that it can be incredibly rewarding.

And as a scientist:

- Will you have the creativity and intelligence to come up with ideas that no one else has thought of?
- And when your greatest insights are first ridiculed, then violently opposed, you must NEVER GIVE UP so you can arrive at the third and final stage that all truths must pass, that of universal acceptance?

Yes, today too few patients are being cured. Sometimes, though, you will save a person's life. And some of you will make a discovery that will help many, if not millions of people. Granted, we all come into medicine expecting such moments to be more frequent than they are, but these moments exist. They are not a myth.

SELF-COMPASSION

When facing dark days, it is important that you recognize the power of self-compassion.

When you experience a setback, there is a tendency to become defensive and blame or berate yourself. Neither response is helpful.

Instead, respond with self-compassion: Be kind to yourself, rather than judgmental, recognize that everyone makes mistakes, and avoid dwelling on the setback. Self-compassion will contribute to your growth as a person and as a physician.²

AND FINALLY... DARE GREATLY

As I conclude, it occurs to me that my remarks may be overwhelming, given you have only been here a few weeks.

As the Breton Fisherman said *“O, God, thy sea is so great and my boat is so small.”* (President Kennedy's favorite quote)

Keep in mind what Theodore Roosevelt said during the speech *“Citizenship in the Republic”*, delivered at the Sorbonne, in Paris, France, on April 23, 1910,

“The credit belongs to the man/woman who is actually in the arena – whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood... who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, – and spends himself/herself in a worthy cause – who at best if he/she wins knows the thrills of high achievement – and if he/she fails at least fails while daring greatly – so that his/her place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.”

Finally, Class of 2022, let us start, today, to begin the work you have come here to do: to learn, to listen carefully, but ask new questions, to see with new eyes, and most of all, to leave this hall today, with a commitment in your hearts and minds to build a new future, that will improve the health and well-being of humanity.

1. Goodwin, D. K. (2018). *Leadership: In Turbulent Times*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

2. Chen, S. (2018, September-October). Give Yourself a Break: The Power of Self-Compassion. *Harvard Business Review*, pp. 116–123.