



Icahn  
School of  
Medicine at  
Mount  
Sinai

My speech is given in honor of the late **Dr. Steven Southwick**, my buddy and dearest friend of 40 years, and a role model for what I will say today.

## **COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS 2022**

### **DENNIS S. CHARNEY, MD**

# **ICAHN SCHOOL OF MEDICINE AT MOUNT SINAI**

Parents and grandparents; family, friends and faculty; Trustees and honored guests; and Class of 2022, it is a great honor to welcome you, in person, to the 53rd Commencement Ceremony of the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai!

Graduates, you are among the most impressive class of students to ever earn MD and PhD degrees at Icahn Mount Sinai, and for that matter, at any medical school in our nation.

The Class of 2022 has consistently demonstrated excellence both academically and in service to patients, our community, and the nation.

Our graduates have made scientific discoveries that help us better understand cancer growth, and resistance to chemotherapy; discovered a mechanism that controls the development of muscle from stem cells; discovered the potential of a new therapy to limit viral infection; and used machine learning to predict cardiac arrhythmia risk and so much more.

Members of the Class have worked to improve community health in rural Ghana, Grenada, Liberia, and Peru.

Locally, their student-run organizations have provided free health care to our neighbors in East Harlem, science education for underprivileged high school students, mentoring for middle school girls, and companionship for patients receiving chemotherapy.

Some examples of our graduates include:

- a NASA engineer whose thesis on human transcription factor networks culminated in the development of a research tool used by scientists around the world;
- an Army lieutenant who served in Afghanistan as a medic and, as a Mount Sinai medical student, treated Afghan evacuees in New Jersey;
- the co-founder of a company that combines machine learning with molecular diagnostics to assist in pregnancy planning.

This is an historic class.

Class of 2022, you made history during your second year, when a virus unleashed a tsunami of disease that struck New York City with deadly force.

Mount Sinai was the epicenter of the epicenter of the outbreak of COVID-19.

Mount Sinai physicians, scientists, nurses, essentially all of our staff responded heroically. Our frontline healthcare workers fought this virus at great personal risk. They demonstrated enormous courage.

And our scientists worked day and night in our laboratories to understand the SARS-CoV-2 virus, to develop the best test to detect and measure antibodies, to determine how to treat COVID-19, and to discover a vaccine to prevent serious illness from the virus.

And Class of 2022, you rose to the occasion, volunteering across the Health System to support Mount Sinai's crisis response, even while continuing your studies remotely.

#### **You helped Mount Sinai save lives.**

Adversity, reveals character. Your response to the pandemic demonstrated resilience, courage, and dedication—traits that will serve you well, very well, in your careers as physicians, scientists, and health care leaders.

Early in the pandemic, as I witnessed the heroism of all of Mount Sinai in the fight against COVID-19, I felt we needed to document this time in our history. We hired a wonderful writer, Deborah Schupack, to tell how we mobilized to battle the greatest health crisis of our era. The result is the book, *Relentless*, a copy of which is being given to each of our graduates today.

Today, I speak about the moral responsibility confronting you at this moment in history. As we continue to battle the COVID-19 pandemic, the world is facing yet another crisis: a horrific war in Ukraine.

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Russia's assault on Ukraine has cost thousands of lives, and injured many thousands more—not only combatants, but also civilians. We have seen the pictures of people murdered on the street, execution-style, their hands tied behind their backs. Russian soldiers have killed women and children, even pregnant women and infants. Vladimir Putin's military has bombed numerous hospitals and health clinics. The World Health Organization counts hundreds of attacks that have impacted health care facilities in Ukraine.

These are war crimes—horrifying and cowardly war crimes. They remind us of the atrocities of the Holocaust —atrocities to which the world said, "Never Again!"

Yet, here we are again! We are witnessing the terrible evil of which humans are capable—man's inhumanity against man.

One of the great thinkers on morality, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, warned that, "Civilizations begin to die when they lose the moral passion that brought them into being in the first place." He urged us to recover "the moral dimension that links our welfare to the welfare of others, making us collectively responsible for the common good."

Physicians and scientists play an essential role in working towards the common good of society because we bring moral passion to our work. That's true for the brave doctors now working in Ukraine, and for the Mount Sinai physicians who have traveled to the Polish-Ukrainian border to help. It is also true of all the work done here at Mount Sinai to fight disease, including COVID-19.

We, as doctors and scientists, must be a powerful force for humanity—to face down inhumanity, even if none of us can singlehandedly stop criminal actors from perpetrating war crimes.

In today's world, class of 2022 we need you to be great physicians and scientists who are the light amid the darkness. We need you to selflessly engage in heroic acts.

The history of the Holocaust provides us with inspiring examples—doctors like Gisella Perl. Years before Dr. Perl was a gynecologist at The Mount Sinai Hospital, she was a physician and an inmate at the Auschwitz death camp. There, she repeatedly defied the orders of the murderous Dr. Josef Mengele, refusing to bring him pregnant women for his sick experiments, saving many of her fellow prisoners in the process.

Pediatrician Henryk Goldszmit, better known by his pen name Janusz Korczak (YAA-noosh KOR-chak), protected Jewish orphans against the Nazis. He wrote: "I exist not to be loved and admired, but to love and act. It is not the duty of those around me to love me. Rather, it is my duty to be concerned about the world, about man."

This is the essence of being a great doctor or scientist. To be a hero today you don't need to confront Nazis or go to battle against Russian troops. But you do need to work on behalf of humanity—to relieve suffering, to improve health, to save lives, to expand knowledge, and to find new cures.

The late Paul Farmer, said "For me moral clarity is: you're in front of someone who is suffering and you have the tools at your disposal to alleviate that suffering or even eradicate it. And you ACT."

Thus, the degree you are receiving today from Mount Sinai is more than a diploma certifying the attainment of a high level of medical and scientific education. It is also an ethical contract. It comes with great responsibility—to serve humanity, especially at a time when we are witnessing inhumanity.

The Talmud, and the Quran, say, "whoever saves a life, it is as if he/she saved an entire world."

As physicians, we strive to help one patient at a time. As scientists, we seek one new insight at a time. Every act of healing, every act of scientific discovery is a step towards fulfillment of your lifelong moral obligation. It is a sacred mission.

At Icahn Mount Sinai we have taught you not only the fundamentals of medicine and biomedical sciences, but also the importance of social justice. This must be a commitment throughout your career.

The 19th century minister Theodore Parker spoke of the moral universe having a long arc that bends towards justice. Martin Luther King, Jr. made this concept famous. Another one of my favorite philosophers, from New Jersey, Bruce Springsteen, put it into practical terms:

"...that arc doesn't bend on its own," said Springsteen. "It needs all of us leaning on it, nudging it in the right direction, day after day."

You have the power to bend that arc. Use it. Fight racism and bias in medicine and science. Work for health equity and social justice.

Class of 2022, at a time when so much is wrong in the world, when a cloud of gloom hangs over so many people, I challenge, I implore you to use your great talent and outstanding education to make the world a better place. And, to do your utmost to heal, to prevent and end disease, to make great discoveries that translate into better health for humanity.

Thank you!