

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS FOR THE GRADUATING CLASS 1994 DAVAO MEDICAL SCHOOL FOUNDATION

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Today, we accompany young people in this rite of passage towards becoming doctors of medicine and doctors of dental medicine, young men and women who have just been given the opportunity to be of service to the country; persons who have been entrusted with the health of the nation.

Today, we welcome them and give them the best of our wishes as they leave the portals of the academe to commence with a new life and blaze the trail etched in their hearts and mind.

Time for Reflection

For today's graduates, it is also the right time for reflection and introspection.

What awaits our new colleagues in the medical profession? To see the answer, it will help to reflect on the education and formation that have made you earn the degree of "Doctor of Medicine" and "Doctor of Dental Medicine"; to reflect on the events and circumstances that coincided with the schooling process; to reflect on our milieu where you are a vital part, now that you are weaned from school. These, my colleagues would also mean reflecting on the title "Doctor" - its meaning to us today, what responsibilities does it carry and what duties does it entail.

For witnessing the ebb and flow of societal change, the Class of 1994, I suppose, has a lot of existential moorings about what to do with their first year or first few years after leaving medical school and getting the board exams. Will they go abroad or pursue a similarly lucrative practice here? What institution will they

work for? Will they go to the remote areas where their expertise is most needed or go to the more financially rewarding and professionally enriching big city? Will they remain as witness or will they get involved in order for the country to make that long overdue leap toward nationhood?

The Past Eight Years

Today's graduates are fortunate. They are witness to the changing thresholds of history that started with EDSA. Today's batch is leaving medical school and facing the world outside when Philippine society is at the crossroads of change. Hopefully a peaceful solution to the ills besetting Philippine society will be at hand.

This batch, therefore, has got much to hope for. But that hope is something that isn't there OUTSIDE OF YOU. The hope is in you! It lies at the heart of what you want to achieve in your life: TO HAVE OR TO BE.

The democratic space we now enjoy is a product of years of struggle that started long before EDSA and continued long after. It was born out of persistent organizing and mobilizing, in the course of which countless lives were offered to make the torch of freedom burning. Davao was an arena in all these struggles. And the lives of many of its best minds were sacrificed so that others including you, members of Class of 94, may live to see the light.

We cannot say that it is only the medical school that you have been remolded. The upheavals in our milieu has affected our psyche, our social being, our whole educational process. For never before has Philippine society been filled with so many lessons as in the last eight years.

Many events jolted us and continue to bear weight on our logic: the attempted coups that dealt blows to an already battered economy; the killing near Malacañang of peasant marchers clamoring for genuine land reform; the slaying by still unidentified elements of progressive leaders who survived the dark days of the dictatorship; the perennial brownouts; the unabated dependence on foreign capital to fuel the economy; graft and corruption; criminality; and the endless politicking.

But let not these things weaken our resolve to serve our people and dampen our hope.

The Challenge to Class 1994

Let me digress a bit to share the tribulation of a health worker now in government to enable us to view the anatomy of hope.

In mid-1992, upon joining the Department of Health, I was shown a thick compilation of health indicators by old hands in the bureaucracy. Breezing through tables and tables of statistics, my attention got stuck on a page bearing the data that 6 out of 10 Filipinos die without seeing a doctor. It got my attention not for the fact that such a piece of information touches one's conscience, but because it was the same piece of information that made me opt to serve in the rural area 18 years ago after leaving medical school. Not without a sense of irony, I asked my new colleagues in government, "Isn't it that 18 years ago, there were only 7 medical schools in the country producing 800 graduates, compared to the present number of 27 producing around 3000 graduates?"

We have come a long way in producing human resources for health. From 7 medical schools in 1974 to 27 in 1993. From 800 medical students who graduated in 1974 to 3000 in 1993. We've produced not only quantity, but quality graduates as well; graduates who count among the best and the brightest in the medical and allied professions here and abroad, earning the respect and admiration of fellow professionals in other countries.

But now, we ask, how far have we gone in reaping this rich harvest?

To our dear graduates now coming into grip with the question of hope in this country, there is a corollary question that demands your intellectual honesty:

Is there hope for a country that produces 3000 medical graduates each year when

60% of Filipinos die without medical attention

92% of morbidities and 51% of mortalities are still due to communicable yet preventable diseases

276/day infant mortality rate has remained high at 60 deaths per 1,000 births

Everyday 55 Filipinos die of Tuberculosis, and 15 die of Renal Disease

186 municipalities are still without doctors?

Clearly, the answer to the question lies in your collective response to the challenge. **AND THE CHALLENGE IS YOURS FOR THE TAKING.**

Goal of the Davao Medical School

As reflected in the mission statement of the Davao Medical School, its goal is "to develop a graduate who is a "person for others", responsible and competent, of high moral caliber, Filipino oriented and imbued with a sense of personal worth."

Since you are now graduates of the Davao Medical School, this is the right time to ask whether you are the graduates that the Davao Medical School intended to mold. The following are questions which only you can answer:

Are you a person for other?

Do you feel responsible and competent?

Is there a sense of personal worth within you now?

Do you have a high moral caliber?

Are you Filipino oriented?

These are also the questions which I posed to your counterparts nine years ago, a time of political and economic turmoil and intense social agitation. Now, as the country stands in the crossroads, those questions are more relevant than ever.

What the DOH is Doing

From elite democracy we still have to evolve to a participatory one more conducive for the advancement of social justice and equity; of giving more to those who have less in life; of empowering those who are at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder so that we can bring them in to the mainstream of the country's economic and political life.

The public health sector can be considered as a trail-blazer in people empowerment. Long before the word became an election battlecry and, later on, a guiding principle of the Ramos administration, people empowerment or people's participation has been the spirit in all well-meaning health endeavors, be it by NGOs or the government. The Primary Health Care concept and the Community Based Health Program attest to the health sector's pioneering works in the community. And this could not have happened had there been no medical professionals willing to serve hand in hand with other professionals in depressed areas.

Cognizant that the people themselves must master the determinants of health that shape their lives and that of their communities, we in the Department of Health are gradually moving away from our role as a provider of health services, and are moving toward the vision of putting HEALTH IN THE HANDS OF THE PEOPLE.

The DOH needs your support in achieving this goal. And for those of you who intend to serve in the rural area for even just a year or two after leaving medical school, I can assure you, that although the financial compensation is nothing compared to private practice or what you will be earning abroad, the satisfaction and fulfillment you will derive from serving the people will always be a treasured part of your life, of your search for character.

Presently, the DOH is working on a package for young doctors (and eventually, nurses and dentists) aimed at striking a balance between the desire to serve the people and the desire to have a sort of financial stimulation to get and keep the adrenalin going. The fear of intellectual stagnation while serving the rural area is likewise being addressed by continuing education programs like

free subscription to medical journals and attendance to major seminars or trainings four times a year. I should say, though, that this fear of intellectual stagnation is not warranted, especially if one is innovative and research-oriented.

Address to Parents

Parental expectation is indeed one of the most difficult realities a new medical and dental graduate has to face. Thus, I would like to address also the parents of the graduating class of 1994 present here now.

Dear parents, I am sure that becoming a community physician or community dentist is not what you expect of your son or your daughter. However, there is a need for us to respond to our country's health situation which demands the services of your son or your daughter at this point in our history.

Despite 27 medical schools producing about 3,000 doctors a year, 6 out of 10 people die without medical attention. Despite this big number of medical graduates each year, 186 municipalities have not seen a doctor for the last 20 years.

I am certain that there are members of the Class of 1994 who long to nourish their character by serving the poor in the community. But I am also just as sure that fear of parental rejection makes them ambivalent towards community service.

To borrow from the words of former Senator Saguisag: For a while, the new doctors and dentists will follow that star that leads them to the remote and depressed areas where medical expertise is most needed, but somewhere down the road, the thought of their parents despising them, labeling them as failures for not being affluent will get into their nerves. They will kiss a dream goodbye and join those who serve the rich and the powerful with ruthless efficiency. In the process, they help reinforce their clients' near monopolistic stranglehold on the country's finest talents, aggravating the inequities in our society.

Dear parents, allow your sons and daughters to give us even just a year of their life.

Concluding Remarks

According to ancient sage Herodotus, "The mind is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be lighted.

It has always been that "a teacher's greatest satisfaction is that we have lit a fire in the students under our care. Our greatest let-down, however, has always been that after lighting such fire in our students, they graduate and then are never given the opportunity to spread the fire that burns in them."

Members of the Class of 1994 of the Davao Medical School, the fire in you has been lit up by the dedication of your teachers and your parents! Reach out your hands! Lives are waiting for you to touch, to heal! Embrace the people, the unwashed, the marginalized and the oppressed and spread the fire that burns in you.

Mabuhay! Congratulations!

I would like to end my address to the Class of '94 by sharing my poetic reflection on one year of community service that you are called upon to give:

Isang Taon Para sa Sambayanan

*Ang isang taon ay hindi dalawa, tatlo o lima.
Isang taon na ngayo'y narito bukas ay wala na.
Isang tag-ulan at tag-init na maaaring gugulin
Sa libirinto ng pag-iisa: sa kalansing ng pilak
at hinabing pangarap.*

O,

*Isang tag-ulan at tag-init na sarili ay mapagya-yabong
tulad ng halamang gubat o papandayin sa isang
matalas na tabak sa piling ng mga mahihina, api at hamak.*

Isang taon, ialay ninyo sa sambayanan.