

'To a young doctor' redux

In June 1964, I received my doctorate in osteopathic medicine. That same month, the JAOA published a classic editorial, "To a young doctor," by my Editor in Chief predecessor, the late George W. Northup, DO. In it, he addressed the graduating class of 1964. As is true with any classic, much of what Dr Northup wrote stands the test of time these 33 years later.

He wrote, "*Many of your older colleagues would count it a privilege to have the opportunity of beginning again.*" I tell each entering class at the Oklahoma State University College of Osteopathic Medicine, "Each of you have the opportunity to become the greatest physician the world has ever known! You will have the opportunity to learn all scientifically proven and commonly accepted methods of diagnosis and treatment discovered, devised, and developed to date." My contemporaries and I know that we must constantly learn the newer methods through continuing medical education programs. I am sometimes wistful of the exciting learning opportunities you are currently experiencing. Would I do it all over again? You bet I would!

Dr Northup continued, "*Some of you will become outstanding physicians, others just doctors.*" What did he mean? Although he didn't develop this thought in the editorial, I suspect he was thinking that an outstanding physician goes beyond treating the illness or injury and considers each patient as a *person*—with a body, mind, and spirit—each of which plays a role in health and disease. The outstanding physician is a teacher who guides each patient to an understanding.

Namely, that it is the patient who is ultimately responsible for his or her own health and recovery from illness. The outstanding physician is an educator to the community at large, informing the people we serve.

I am sure that Dr Northup saw the outstanding physician as a civic leader. In the role as advisor to public health policy makers, the physician can be certain then that policy decisions are based on basic biomedical truths.

"It is not enough for you to treat the sick and receive remuneration for it. Your debt to society is far greater than the mere act of working can repay.... Material things will come as just rewards for service faithfully rendered, but if they are sought as goals in themselves, the reward will be empty." Somewhere along the way, many physicians have forgotten that we exist solely to serve society—not the reverse. Volunteerism and pro bono care are now often seen as discounts and uncollectables. The outstanding physician will never lose touch with the spark that brought him or her to the study of medicine in the first place—the chance to make a difference in the lives of people. As the graduating class of 1997, you have that chance.

Dr Northup concluded his 1964 piece writing, "*May the profession be worthy of you and may you always be worthy of the highest attainments of the profession.*" I couldn't say it better, except to add, "Congratulations!" ♦

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