

May 15, 2020

Dear Faculty, Staff, Fellows, Residents and Students,

With a third month of crisis management upon us, we remain focused – and rightly so – on the immediate concerns of our patients and our labs. But times of great strain can also shine a light on the bigger picture of what we do as individuals and as an institution.

Today we are sending another class of graduates out into the world and I had the privilege of addressing this group of people whose resilience in the face of recent challenges has been an inspiration. In my remarks, I tried to do justice to what is extraordinary about our mission in healthcare and the health sciences and I want to share those words with you, who live and support that mission every day. Although they were used for the commencement recognition of the graduating medical school class, I believe these words describe the work that all of you do in our health care practice and biomedical research activities.

Sincerely,

David H. Perlmutter, MD

Executive Vice Chancellor for Medical Affairs and Dean

Class of 2020: I know this is not how you imagined your graduation. Over the course of all of these years – the grueling days and nights when you pushed yourselves both physically and mentally beyond where you ever thought possible--you may have once or twice thought about this moment. You probably imagined walking across a stage in your regalia, your families and friends cheering you on; a moment full of pomp and circumstance; a recognition and a celebration of the almost inconceivably hard work you put in at one of the world's leading medical schools.

I'm quite certain you did not expect to be sitting in your homes, apart from your classmates, hearing me speak to you through a screen.

If we had gathered as planned downtown, in person, I would have talked about your unbelievable accomplishments. The leadership you have shown in spearheading the kinds of initiatives that have changed the landscape of our school, like your medical Spanish program, several of your wellness-promoting programs and 500 Women in Medicine.

I would surely have mentioned your outstanding academic performance and the incredible success you had in matching to our country's top medical and surgical residency programs. Your dedication to serving your community was particularly evident in the last few weeks, as many of you led or contributed to the School's COVID-19 volunteer efforts.

I would have also offered an inspirational message, perhaps talking about how the role of the physician and the physician-scientist asks that we draw from a deep inner well in order to serve others, often at our own expense and even in situations when that seems impossible.

I would have talked about how it demands that we use careful analysis and logic, even when there are no right answers, no good answers, no established protocols or algorithms. That we look for solutions grounded in data and science, in spite of those who would dismiss the careful study and rigorous standards upon which our profession is built.

Speaking to you now from the ether rather than in person as I would have liked, it is clear that all of these qualities – all of what you are and what we hope you will continue to become – have taken the spotlight. In a time when challenges to science and the dismissal of facts have been woefully widespread, we now face a problem, a formidable virus, that demands solutions grounded in data and scientific imagination and there is urgency.

We now have a problem that attracts the attention of the entire world to those values that we have emphasized during your education and training here---the selflessness and sacrifice of the physician, our commitment to the sickest and most vulnerable and the vital importance of basic biomedical research.

As you know, a special reverence for the scientific basis of medicine has been a trademark of Washington University for many decades. Now, in our new reality, all eyes are on physicians and physician-scientists, looking to us to provide solutions, from the diagnostic tests critical for public health to therapeutic drugs and new vaccines, in many ways the ultimate validation of what this medical school has always stood for.

As I have thought about the professional journey upon which you are about to embark in the midst of the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 crisis, a passage from Albert Camus' novel *The Plague* strikes me as so fitting. This famous novel follows a physician as he experiences an outbreak of the bubonic plague ravaging his city.

I know, a subject now very close to home.

This doctor, who is called on to provide medical care to those who had been stricken, to console families in their lowest moments, and also to help guide the community in containing the outbreak and preventing chaos, is described with the following phrase "it was as if he was fighting against creation as he found it."

Why do I think that description is something any physician can relate to? Why does that phrase resonate so deeply for me? Because our role is to confront the human condition as it is given to us and

then to use our intelligence, science and judgement to cajole it into sparing those who would be taken from us and to limit the harm it might do to others.

Right now, fighting against creation means using all of our expertise and all of our resources to contain a virus that has disrupted life as we know it and brought the world to its knees. But we know that this is not just true in times of plague. As physicians, we are always, in some ways, “fighting against creation” on our hospital wards, in our clinics, and in our labs. I want to say that again.

We know that your clinical education has helped you to understand this deeply.

We have watched how you have grown into the physicians you are now. Time and again, you have looked at your world and figured out how to make it better, safer, more equitable. All of the qualities that we hope to cultivate in the next generation of doctors and scientists– you have them in spades.

Today, as we officially welcome you into our ranks, we must acknowledge that we are sending you out into a world full of unknowns.

You are heading out into a more uncertain medical landscape than any previous graduating class has encountered. This, too, you are ready for.

I know you have experienced multiple cycles of grief over these last few weeks as it became clear that we would not be able to recognize you in the grand and public way we should and that you so richly deserve. But you have been flexible and resilient and gracious.

I know I speak on behalf of the entire faculty when I say that you have made us all proud and offered us renewed hope in the future of medicine at a time when we are so clearly in need of it.

This graduation is not what any of us imagined or wanted for you. And, while it will always be true that you graduated medical school during a time of great crisis, it will also always be true that you became doctors at a time when the value of physicians to society could not possibly be more profound.

The eyes of the world are on our hospitals and our labs and they will soon be on you, as well. How fortunate we are that you are the future of medicine and medical science. There are challenges ahead but you are ready for them. Congratulations, Washington University Class of 2020, from our school, from me and from my 93-year-old mother who is fighting covid-19 and holding her own, we cannot wait to see how you change the world and make it a better place.