

Vice chancellor, Dean, Faculty members invited guests and dear new entrants to this medical school – Thank you all for inviting me to address you as chief guest on this august occasion.

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Congratulations! And Welcome to Peradeniya Medical School.

It's so good to be here with you on this exciting day. I was delighted to be asked to share some thoughts that might be relevant to you all as you get started on this incredible ride.

I have nostalgic memories of this place and this occasion. Nearly sixty years ago I stood in this same lecture hall giving my first Physiology lecture to a group such as you. I am not sure who was more nervous or more apprehensive; myself or my audience.

The long-awaited first day of medical school has arrived. You're about to begin a life-changing journey to become a doctor. Your mind races with the questions - can I really do this, what if I'm not smart enough, and how much will I have to study and a million other things. You are about to embark upon an exciting, life-altering experience, one you will never forget. You are about to join an elite group of people from all over the island who will now be your peers who will go forward together. You will meet people from different cultures, ethnic backgrounds, religions, social and economic strata but you will all be together in the common melting pot of medicine. You will support each other, help each other, you will have common grouses and complaints about your teachers, learning programs and examinations. But believe me – you will end up with a set of lifelong friends whom you will depend on wherever you are in this globe.

You may not realize this; but you will be basing your entire medical career on something that you are already familiar with – the concept

of homeostasis. It was only the other day that I was trying to explain homeostasis to my granddaughter who is doing her O level Biology. So I am sure that you have an idea of the constancy of the internal environment espoused by the famous physiologist Claude Bernard. First of all in medical school you will learn in depth the mechanisms utilized by the body in maintaining its internal environment constant. You will learn how the body is designed anatomically and the physiological and biochemical mechanisms available in the body to maintain a stable internal environment. You will then go on to study various disturbances that occur in disease in detail – that is what happens when the internal environment is upset - and the available mechanisms in the body to counteract these disturbances. Finally what you have been waiting for – that is, as a doctor or a healer, what are the resources available to you in order to heal or ease the suffering of a fellow human being and how you could best use these resources.

Being a medical student will involve working harder than you've ever worked in your life – but chances are, it'll also involve having more fun than you've ever had before. There are plenty of off-putting myths about being a medical student, but in reality it's enjoyable, interesting and highly rewarding, especially in the light of what you're working towards – the three Cs - competency, caring attitude and compassion towards the sick. Your first and foremost duty is to achieve competence in what you do and be sensitive and compassionate while doing it.

You will be continually fascinated, and not a single day will go by from now until you retire that you aren't challenged by something you have never encountered before. You will be solving problems and thinking, using your brain for the good of your fellow human beings.

You see, today you take a big step into power. With your white coat and your stethoscope, you enter today a life of new and vast privilege. You may not notice your power at first. You will not always

feel powerful or privileged — not when you are dissecting cadavers and sitting up half the night studying for exams and struggling through hard days of too many tasks.

But this will be true: In return for your years of learning and your dedication to a life of service and your willingness to take an oath to that duty, society will give you access and rights that it gives to no one else. Society will allow you to hear secrets from frightened human beings that they are too scared to tell anyone else. Society will permit you to use drugs and instruments that can do great harm as well as great good, and that in the hands of others would be weapons. Society will give you special titles and spaces of privilege, as if you were priests. Society will let you build walls and write rules."

You should realize that you have today entered an institution which is held in highest esteem in this country and outside in the world and which produce medical graduates who are second to none. You should therefore be proud and feel privileged that you are medical students of Peradeniya .

One thing I want to say at this stage is don't be scared. I was frightened out of my wits on my first day in medical school. Added to my fright was the thought of those dead bodies awaiting me in the anatomy lab. With all the giddy excitement you feel my guess is you're also feeling a little uncertain today. You have suddenly grown up – people addressing you as Miss or Mr. no longer simple Samantha or Samanthi. Your whole life in your hands. And you're being flung into a world that's running about as smoothly as a car with square wheels. Adulthood has come upon you suddenly and you're not all that sure you're ready for it. I want you to know that it's OK to be uncertain. In a world like this, it's appropriate to be uncertain. You're an adult in a time when the leaders of the world are behaving like children whose demands are not negotiable, a

world teeming with corruption as all of us in this island know to our cost. A world where inflation has broken all records. Where the central image of our day is a terrorist one: humane concerns inhumanely expressed. And where the only response to this is impotent fury and violence – in other words Aragalaya.

Having said all that I asked myself what advice I should give you as a doctor, an educationist and as a former Dean of this medical school.

I remember my first day in medical school long years ago. So long that I am surprised that I do so. I remember the Dean of the college, a rather threatening but very impressive personality universally known by an endearing nickname saying “I say you fellows (totally ignoring the fact that there were females around – he didn’t believe that there were such characters as female doctors) If you want to graduate from this medical school, don’t fall behind and don’t fall in love”. I certainly did fall behind as did us all at one time or other, some of us fell in love though not all. It happened to me somewhat later. But all of us finally graduated as doctors. So the first bit of advice – Don’t believe what everyone says.

OK – the second bit of advice - Don’t cram. Everyone does it, but it doesn’t help you learn. To me, learning was understanding the concepts, not memorizing the words. Even anatomy microbiology and pharmacology were about learning relationships. They still are. How did you learn directions to come here today? By seeing where things are on a map and by relating those things to the place you were going. Learn medicine in the same way.

It is humanly impossible to remember everything that you learn. Therefore you should know how and where to retrieve information. That means you should be comfortable acquiring and making use of information from the internet.

One thing someone known to me did when he was a medical student was to try to read the next lecture topic ahead of time in the books so that when a lecturer addressed a subject he already had some idea what it was and could ask questions in his mind about it. I know it is not always possible but it is worth trying - it seemed to help understanding and retention.

The other very difficult thing to do in this electronic age is to avoid distractions while studying. Your greatest challenge will be to put your cell phone down. We didn't have "smart phones" when I was in medical school, so I didn't have to worry about that distraction. Think about it now, though. Does it really matter whether you get your girlfriend's text message immediately or a few hours from now? Do you really need to check your e-mail that often? If there's something that important pending, then deal with it before you go to study. When you study, focus on studying.

A quote I found recently "The elevator to success is out of order. You'll have to use the stairs – One step at a time"

I'll let you on to a secret for doing well at exams. This is very important! Most professors are not industrious enough to create new questions for each exam. And there are only so many questions you can ask about the same topic. Therefore, many questions are repeated. Some may have wording changes, but most questions are based on the same concepts. By learning and understanding what concepts appeared on previous tests and are therefore important, you're well on your way to doing well at the tests. Copies of previous test questions are freely available in the internet and elsewhere and you should make use of them.

With all this advice, still you are going to do poorly at tests sometime or the other. Everyone does. I did. All your teachers did. Study hard, do your best, keep plugging along, and don't get discouraged. If you put in the effort, you will graduate. Surviving in a

medical school is tough, but in the end it's worth the struggle! All you need is perseverance, endurance, belief in yourself and a pinch of compassion.

You are sure to find that university and medical school are quite different from what you were used to in secondary school. You will need to absorb, learn and understand more information in a shorter period of time than ever before in your life. Regardless of how much we have tried to improve things with focused learning objectives, integrated courses, clinical experiences, and other attempts to make the burden more tolerable, the truth is you need to be prepared for the most difficult educational experience of your life. That said, the fact that you have been accepted to our medical school means that we believe you have what it takes to be successful.

Here are some ways you can make that happen.

First – Don't miss classes: Although there are some rare exceptions, there is a very close relationship between class attendance and success in medical school. Even though at times, you may think, your time would be better spent studying on your own, the evidence tells us this is not true for the vast majority of students. Consider your medical education like a job. Your pay is your successful grades. You would not expect to be paid if you did not show up for work, would you? Lastly it is your professional responsibility to be where you are supposed to be when you are supposed to be there.

Second – Be familiar with learning objectives: One of the most difficult things to figure out in medical education is, of all of the information that is thrown at you in your classes, which are the most important? This is often translated by students to "What's going to be on the test?" The answer to this is; "It's in the Learning Objectives". Over the next few weeks, you will learn what learning

objectives are and you will be given a set of objectives in each of your subjects. Learning objectives are concise statements about the most important information being taught during the class you are attending. Every question you will be asked on your internal examinations is directly tied to a learning objective. Consequently, if you have a solid understanding of the LO for the courses you are taking, you cannot help but succeed. They are truly a roadmap to success.

Third – Ask for assistance: There are faculty members who are experts on learning skills, time management, and assistance with learning disabilities. They can help struggling students to be successful, and help good students to be better.

Last - Study Hard, Study Often: Successful medical students do not wait until the week before examinations to begin studying. The quantity of information, and the level of understanding needed to get good grades in medical school make the concept of cramming a recipe for failure. Good students describe a consistent regimen of going to class, reading assignments and studying for understanding, not simply memorization.

Well, if you find all of the above Do's and Don'ts daunting, that would be normal. Despite the difficulty and rigor of medical education, it is an exciting and wonderful experience. I think back to my medical school experience with a great deal of nostalgia. There will never be another time in your life where your single responsibility will be to learn as much as you can. Take every advantage of it. It will pay off like nothing else you have experienced. The Faculty at Peradeniya will, I am sure, are eagerly looking forward to helping you along the way and watching your development into the physician that you have dreamed of becoming.

Looking around this audience, I notice that a large number of you are women. It is different from my time when women doctors were somewhat scarce. In fact we have noticed over the years that women are outnumbering men in the numbers that enter medical colleges in Sri Lanka. This was not so in my time and in fact entry of women to medical school was somewhat discouraged. I remember the time when I gained entry to medical school my parents were delighted but not so my other relatives. In fact there was an old aunt who lived with us at the time and used to look after us when we were small – she told my father “what nonsense is this? It is high time that you looked for a good man and got her married”. I was of course furious and was glad that my father prevailed.

Even late as the late nineteenth century, female physicians faced discrimination in many forms due to the prevailing Victorian Era attitude that the ideal woman be demure, display a gentle demeanor, act submissively, and enjoy a perceived form of power that should be exercised from within the home. The predominant, conservative viewpoint was that a woman's primary duty was to be a steward of a moral world by shaping the character of her children and being a dutiful wife. Few women chose to work outside of a few specific professions, if they worked outside of the home at all, and even fewer ventured into jobs outside of teaching and nursing, especially as doctors. Fortunately attitudes have undergone a drastic change and it is up to women now to come forward and play a more significant role in leadership in medicine medical education and research.

Most countries of the world now provide women with equal access to medical education. However, there is this horrific example of Afganistan which has banned higher education and job oriented learning for women. Not all countries ensure equal employment opportunities, and gender equality has yet to be achieved within medical specialties and around the world, despite studies

suggesting that female doctors may be providing higher-quality care than male doctors. For example, some medical specialties, such as surgery, are significantly male-dominated, while other specialties such as radiology and pathology are significantly female-dominated, or are becoming so. It is encouraging that the question of gender does not play a role in Sri Lanka when it comes to choosing a specialty.

I like to end this talk with an extract from an article “Advice to young doctors from members of the BMJ's editorial board”. “Learn to cope with uncertainty, Challenge what you are taught, especially if it seems inconsistent or incoherent. Don't believe what you read in medical journals and newspapers. Aim at knowing how to learn, how to get useful medical information, and how to critically assess information”

Lord Buddha in his address to the Kalamas (residents of a village known as Kesaputtha), said exactly that. The Kālāma Sutta, is a discourse of the Buddha contained in the Aṅguttara Nikaya of the Tripiṭaka. It is often cited by those of the Theravada and Mahayana traditions alike as the Buddha's "charter of free inquiry”.

“Do not believe in anything simply because you have heard it

Do not believe in traditions because they have been handed down by many generations

Do not believe in anything because it is spoken and rumored by many

Do not believe in anything simply because it is written in books

Do not believe in anything merely on the authority of your elders and teachers

But after your own observation and analysis, when you find anything that agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it”

I wish all of you a rewarding time in medical school and future success.