

**Doctors don't stop being people**  
**Stethoscope Ceremony**  
**21 August 2012**  
**David McKnight**

Welcome to our third U of T Stethoscope Ceremony. This whole week is designed to welcome you to the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto. Today, we want to welcome the new students to the PROFESSION of Medicine

First, I have some questions for the new students. Who has ever seen an episode of *House*? *Grey's Anatomy*? *Scrubs*?

I have sad news: this is real life and this is a real medical school. It's not *House* — brilliance (not that he is brilliant) does not excuse any behaviour. It's not *Grey's* — boundaries exist, and sex is not the primary motivator. It's not *Scrubs* — it will not be a farce (although there will be joyful as well as sad times.)

This is a real medical school. There are expectations. When you get to clinical rotations you will find that the term "Meets Expectations," has a very important meaning. And, as well as knowledge expectations, there will be Professional expectations.

Two years ago, at the first of these ceremonies, I talked about two words at the core of professionalism, **TRUST** and **RESPECT**. **TRUST**: the importance of being worthy of the trust that your patients and colleagues, and even society will place in you as a physician. **RESPECT**: the importance that you show respect — respect for patients, respect for the team you work with, respect for yourself.

Last year, the theme was "IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU." Medicine is always about somebody else: usually the patient, sometimes their family, sometimes a whole community, but not about us, not about the doctors.

This year let's look at an essential truth it is easy to forget: **DOCTORS DON'T STOP BEING PEOPLE.**

The members of the class of 2016 have come to us chosen for many qualities including intelligence, knowledge, and wide-ranging accomplishment. But you were also chosen for human qualities: skill in communication, kindness, compassion, concern for others. Keep those qualities. In the pressures of medical school and learning there is a tendency toward an impersonal machine-like state striving for perfection. People will demand much. There is a danger of becoming a "robot."

Doctors are not machines; they are people, they are human. They have needs — for family, friends, for "down-time" — time for relaxation, for fun, time to breathe, time to rest, time to

sleep. Doctors are not perfect — they may become ill themselves; they will make mistakes. Don't imagine as you build your knowledge and skills that you are also building a pedestal. Resist those that imply that you will, or even ought to be, perfect. I hope you will all be excellent; I know that you will not be perfect. Always be willing to ask for help when you need it: help with learning, help with clinical work, help for yourself.

There are two reasons to keep these things in mind. First, is for your own sake. Healthy and happy doctors are better doctors.<sup>1</sup>

The second reason is the patients (you knew that was coming, didn't you?) Patients want and need human doctors; not machines, not robots, not gods or demigods. They need a *person* who will listen and relate and who will do their best — never perfect — for the person who is the patient.

## STETHOSCOPE CEREMONY

So now we come to the stethoscope ceremony. As you know, some medical schools have a white coat ceremony for new students but there are some of us here who are uncomfortable with the white coat as a symbol of the profession. We fear that it emphasizes differences between the doctor and the patient. It can set doctors, and medical students, apart. It can be seen as elitist.

We have chosen the stethoscope as our symbol. It is only functional if there is a person at each end — and it is all about listening.

Throughout your career, remember the symbolism of the stethoscope: stay humble; listen; show respect, remember it's always about the patient, and stay human.

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<sup>1</sup>*"Mens sana in corpore sano." "A sound mind in a sound body." Juvenal (ca 60–130 AD), Satires, no. 10, l. 356*