

LSUE Commencement Address, May 24, 2003

I am honored by the opportunity to deliver this commencement address. Going to school here on the Grand Prairie with all of its natural beauty must be a wonderful experience. I fear that were I a student here, I might spend more time doing other things that young people want to do than attending to the hard business of putting information into my brain. Learning is often fun, but it takes time and discipline to do it well.

I have meditated over what I could or should say today that would have some impact. I considered talking about teaching. The Lord knows I have done enough of it. I believe that I have had some teaching contact with almost 5000 medical students. And, there are about 125 surgeons that I have trained who are now in practice. But, what could I say. If you were sitting on the Isle of Cos some 2500 years ago being taught by Hippocrates, the father of western medicine, the principles would be much the same. The database of human knowledge is infinitely larger, but the process of learning is unchanged. It takes a data source and a willing mind. It requires discipline, and it is work. Knowledge is not acquired by passive diffusion, it is acquired by work.

Rather, I will spend my time talking about the health care professions. Health and longevity are of interest to us all, and many of you have studied professions allied to health care. First, I want to emphasize that health care is changing at an ever-accelerating speed. We will start with a few facts.

Health care in the United States is said to be the best in the world, and I don't doubt that it is, but that does not mean that it is anywhere near as good as it might be. Wealth, education, and geography are the primary determinants of who gets quality health care. If you have plenty of money, if you live in the right place, and are well enough educated to know when you need attention, your health care will be much different from people who don't have these advantages.

Our system of health care has many problems. We spend 14.5% of our gross national income on health care, which is more than any other country in the world. Yet, about 40 million of our citizens are without health insurance. Premiums for health insurance rise substantially annually. If nothing changes, the number of people without insurance can be expected to rise rapidly.

Medical malpractice costs have reached a crisis level which causes doctors to leave certain geographic areas or refuse to treat certain types of illnesses. The medical malpractice costs in Mississippi have caused many

physicians who live in Natchez to move their practices across the river to Vidalia. Every day some health care system goes into bankruptcy. Hospitals are closing or reducing services. Emergency rooms are overwhelmed with patients, and everywhere there are shortages of health care professionals: doctors, nurses, physician assistants, radiology and laboratory technicians, and rehabilitation specialists are all in short supply. Does this sound like a problem? Are we witnessing a meltdown of the system? I am here to tell you that I believe we are.

Our health care system has always grown in an unorganized and unpredictable way. Great medical centers are commonly the shadows of some great physician or group of physicians. We have had a laissez-faire attitude about health care, which served Americans reasonably well for a long time, but the system seems to be crumbling and I fear the center will not hold. There are many stormclouds on the horizon.

First, the population is becoming very large. There are now about 290 million Americans, and the population increases about 3 million a year. In addition, the population is aging rapidly. Older people need more care, and that care is more complex and costly.

We are experiencing ever increasing costs and declining results. The reason for that is fairly simple. If we want to really get a lot for the money,

we can invest in proper sewage and water treatment in certain parts of the world and for about one dollar per person the average life expectancy can be extended by 7-8 years. A program of immunizations can increase life expectancy in these populations for 4-5 additional years at a cost of 2-3 dollars per person per year. Minimal public health education will add another few years at a moderate but increasing expense. The problem is that the older the population the more money it requires to extend life for shorter and shorter times. This is best illustrated by a graph in which longevity is plotted on the horizontal and cost on the vertical and that curve is like this.

(Gesture). Life expectancy can be extended at a modest investment of money for the first 4-5 decades of life. But, somewhere about the age of 55 the curve takes a vertical turn. So that you get less and less prolongation of life for more and more cost. For example, in this age group heart operations are commonly required which may cost 50-75 thousand dollars to increase the life expectancy of one person for a few years. The corollary to this reasoning is that the cost of immortality is infinite.

In the United States we are working on the very upper end of this cost curve. We have patients in their eighties, each of whom may spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to increase a single life by months, not years. This cannot continue indefinitely. So, what can we do? What can we expect?

We must find a way to provide better care for less money and provide it in a more homogenous way.

Some form of single payer system, some form of mandated health insurance will have to be developed and as difficult as that will be, it is the simplest problem. We must change our whole attitude or approach to health care. Since the dawn of western medicine we have treated the crisis. That is, when a bone is broken, we set it; when appendicitis occurs we remove the appendix; when an ulcer perforates we close it. This worked well as long as life expectancy averaged 50 or even 60 years, but our life expectancy now averages about 80 years.

People in their 60's have on the average 2 or 3 chronic diseases, people in their 70's have 3-5 chronic diseases. People in their 80's have 6 or 7 chronic diseases. The secret is to prevent the acute and life-endangering complications of these chronic diseases. I will give only a few examples. Seventy-three % of the people with high-blood pressure do not receive adequate treatment to prevent heart disease or strokes. A very high percentage do not even know they have it. More than half the people with diabetes are not receiving adequate treatment to prevent its deadly complications. Seventy-five percent of the people with clinical depression don't receive adequate treatment even after they see a doctor. Eighty-five

percent of patients with hypercholesterolemia don't receive treatment for it until they have already had a heart attack. Some 60-70% of the cost of health care is spent during the last year of life. This has to be changed.

Changing it requires a different type of investment, one that invests in chronic disease control rather than treating only the acute event. This will require a different type of health care professional. We must have more physician extenders, nurse clinicians, public health nurses, traveling laboratories, community diagnostic centers. In other words, allied health professionals will be needed in ever-greater supply and undoubtedly will attain positions of more responsibility and higher income. Those of you who have chosen these fields of work will find that you will have chosen well and can look forward to exciting careers. I wish you well. Get ready for an exciting ride. Those of you whose careers do not relate to medicine should pay attention to chronic diseases as you acquire them, which you will.

Thank you for the opportunity to make these comments. It is nice when one gets old to have the opportunity to pontificate. Although when preparing such speeches, I never know if anyone is listening. Though I have just stated my view of the future of our national health care, I am reminded that Hippocrates said it is hazardous to prognosticate; in other words, it is hazardous to predict the future. Still, I make a final prediction – I predict

that you will long remember this milestone in your life even if you do not recall the content of your commencement address.

Thank you for your attention.