

‘Keep asking questions’

Medicine is about caring for others

By DERMOT KELLEHER



Professor Dermot Patrick Kelleher. PHOTO: KEYON MITCHELL

Professor Dermot Kelleher received an honorary Doctor of Science (DSc) from The University of the West Indies for his contributions to science, medicine, research and academia. This is his guest speech to graduates on Saturday, October 27, 2018 at the 4pm graduation ceremony for the Faculty of Medical Sciences.

My name is Dermot Kelleher and I'm Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of British Columbia. I was born in the UK to an Irish father and a Trinidadian mother but grew up and spent most of my young life in Ireland in a small town by the sea called Greystones.

I went to public schooling – initially in a class of 55 kids, all Irish, and many whose education stopped at 14 – where my siblings and I stood out for a few reasons. Firstly, we ate different food – curry and rice, for instance; rice was only eaten as dessert in Ireland. My mother would also occasionally find mangos and other exotic fruits and we all looked forward to our garlic pork and black cake at Christmas. The second area that stood out was music: we listened to steel pan music and the Mighty Sparrow on a big old gramophone at home... often at very loud volumes.

I suspect that my mother was just like your mothers; she was absolutely convinced of the value of education. Along the way, I went from the class of 55 at junior school to the class of 34 at high school and to studying medicine in a small class of about 64 at the 400-year-old ancient university, Trinity College Dublin; what an amazing place.

There were a few other medics and dentists in our extended family. My first cousin Paul studied dentistry and practices in Trinidad; his two brothers are orthopaedic surgeons and there are now a few medics in the next generation, including my son Sean.

One of the most transformational events in my life occurred when my Trinidadian cousin David and his late wife Anne Marie kindly took me in to do an elective at UNC in Chapel Hill, North Carolina – a place where I truly discovered the academic method of questioning and researching all that you do, using the literature and evidence to determine what is best for your patients – a process of constant questioning.

I returned to Trinity College Dublin to finish my final year in medical school with a very different approach – one that saw me taking out a bunch of subscriptions to medical journals, one that had me reading the literature continually and one which eventually led me to this academic life.

So – my first message to you all is to always remember and be proud of where you come from. The kids in the school that I attended who left school at 14 still haunt my memories – I know that some could have done what I did if they had the opportunities. You all have had the most wonderful gift from your parents and from The University of the West Indies – the gift of education, and more importantly, a medical education.

What is it about studying medicine? This is the most magical of professions. It's a life where no two days are the same and where every day when you wake up, you know that your life is dedicated to improving the human condition. It's a life where knowledge, intuition and compassion combine...none of these are sufficient in themselves. Most importantly it's a life of constant questioning; you may get the opportunity to ask questions through research – and this is wonderful – but you won't do badly if every day when you see your patients, you constantly question: Why this case is different from the last? How is the patient's social status influencing their disease? Why does this patient and their sibling have unusual cardiac arrhythmia, or a rash, etc.?

I've been fortunate to have pursued an academic medical career that has combined laboratory and clinical research. I had an outstanding mentor early in my career who took a keen interest in my career development and I went from Dublin to San Diego and back again, becoming the Professor of Medicine and then Head of School at Trinity before becoming Dean at Imperial and NTU Singapore (at the same time!) before finally becoming Dean at UBC. In my last year at Trinity we celebrated the Medical School's 300-year anniversary, based on a meeting by the Professors in 1711 in a coffee shop in Dublin where they decided on the standards for the examination of medical students. That brought home to me the fact that we are all standing on the shoulders of giants, that in medicine we have an extraordinary and unique opportunity to pass on the knowledge that we gain; a unique connection to the past, to those wonderful words of Hippocrates and beyond.

Along the way, I've had the privilege to work with so many wonderful people, to ask fundamental research questions and most importantly to see my medical students graduate in three different continents and to reflect on the fundamental basis of my life –

my Trinidadian mother's belief that education was the greatest gift that a parent can bestow.

So I ask you to applaud your parents, grandparents, families. Remember throughout your lives that it's because of them that you are what you are, and where you are – and right now, it's here, receiving your medical degrees.

Now, there is a quote that is sometimes wrongly attributed to the Irish poet Yeats, but really goes back to Ancient Rome, that "Education is not the filling of a bucket, it's the lighting of a flame". I've always loved this quote. It speaks to the power of knowledge and the importance of those that impart it with passion and enthusiasm; your teachers and mentors who have brought you here today.

Studying medicine has always had two sides to it. Firstly, I think that you will agree that it's a lot of hard work. But secondly, medical students always seem to have a lot of fun in their journey through university and beyond. And part of that fun for me as a young man was the music of Winston Bailey the Mighty Shadow. Whenever we put his music on the turntable or on the mixtape, everyone would start to dance. I was very excited to hear that I would have the opportunity to meet him today, and very saddened by his passing. So can I say thank you to the Mighty Shadow for some very happy times. May he Rest In Peace.

Now, today is about rejoicing in the moment. It's about throwing your caps in the air; it's about congratulating your peers; and it's about spending time and honouring the family and friends who have supported you every step of the way through medical school.

While this ceremony is about celebrating all that you have achieved, it is also about reflecting, about looking back on what inspired you and what brought you here today.

Perhaps you were inspired by a physician, or a nurse, or a health professional. Perhaps you were inspired by a patient, maybe someone you came close to who had an illness. Or perhaps you were inspired by a story — a medical discovery, a tale of compassion or a story of people working towards a common goal.

But no matter who — or what — ultimately compelled you to embark on this journey, you did so because you were inspired to serve, and to care. You were inspired to help improve the lives of patients, of our communities, and of our world. This journey through medical school, as it turns out, is never about you — it is all about serving others.

And today, as you celebrate this momentous achievement, graduating as a doctor from the Faculty of Medicine at The University of the West Indies, I hope you take time to reflect on what first inspired you to care.

As we look ahead, we must consider, first and foremost, our capacity to positively impact society. The contract with society that we espouse as physicians is a living contract. It is intended to remind ourselves that every day as educators, researchers and physicians, we serve the people of our communities, and indeed the world.

And now — as when every great journey comes to a close — it's time to look towards the horizon, to the next chapter.

In the coming years, you will continue on your path as residents, trainees, fellows, and ultimately as practising doctors. And I have no doubt that you are all incredibly well equipped to transition into your new role. But I ask that as you transition, pause often to acknowledge that with this graduation in honour, comes a graduation in responsibility. You must continue to push yourself to learn every day from every patient encounter and from every new role you take on. Continue to build on your skills, to acquire new knowledge, and remember, remember, remember to serve as a true mentor to the medical students who come after you — again a principle that goes back to Hippocrates and beyond.

And don't just collaborate, but learn from other health professionals: nurses, the physical therapists, the midwives, the occupational therapists and the genetic counsellors, who bring unique skill sets and knowledge to the field of healthcare.

Keep your sense of curiosity, keep asking questions — and above all else, be driven by a larger commitment to contribute to your field and society as a whole.

To wherever your journey as a doctor takes you, I wish you all the best on the road ahead, and my deepest congratulations. You have chosen the greatest profession of all.