

**George A. O. Alleyne
Director, PAHO ·
25 May 2001**

**A MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION
(Ontario, Canada)****

Mr. Chancellor, first let me add my words of congratulation to the new graduates and their families. There will be few times in your lives when it is more appropriate to celebrate your joint achievement.

Mr. Chancellor, I wish now to thank you and your university for the great distinction you have conferred on me. Every company of masters and scholars that is the essence of a university guards jealously its traditions and its membership, as it seeks to keep faith with the long line of clerks that stretches back in antiquity to the founders of the original universities. We clerks have always had a sacred charge to create new knowledge and transmit the critical information from which knowledge is built. I take seriously the responsibility that devolves upon me on being admitted to your company.

Thus, I reflected on what I might say to your new graduates that might be of relevance to them as they step out from the world of cloistered learning into a new world that may not appear to be so brave. I thought I would try to distill into a few words some of the knowledge I have acquired, and pass on some information on the issues that have become critical since I sat in their place some 44 years ago, and began to be consumed with the magnificent obsession that is human health.

First, I have learnt that we must never lose faith in the nobility of the health professions, and I am not being overly dramatic when I say that there are few things in life more satisfying than being able to work in the field of health. There will be different furrows in the field to be ploughed. Some of you will become fixed on the promotion of health as one of the essential freedoms of mankind that is valued in its own right, or valued because it is instrumental towards the achievement of other freedoms, such as education or the possession of the economic means of livelihood. Some will be enthusiastic about the prevention of disease and infirmity, and perhaps many more of you will dedicate yourselves to the cure of illness and rehabilitation of persons therefrom. But I ask you all never to shirk the task of giving support when the inevitable moment

* **Pan American Health Organization, Pan American Sanitary Bureau, Regional Office for the Americas of the World Health Organization.**

** **Convocation address at Queen's University after receiving honorary degree of Doctor of Laws. 25-26 May 2001, Ontario, Canada.**

comes to help your fellow man or woman die with dignity. Too often we forget that this is also one of the responsibilities of the health profession.

I have learnt not to be afraid of change. You will help to shape that change, and indeed much of it is not in the fundamentals. When we look below the sediment that has been layered by the great technological advances, we can still see the basic and fundamental value of the need to ensure the wholeness of the person that is health. It is customary to agonize over the change in growth of information and the movement from connectivity to interactivity, with its implications for health. But sincerely, one of the greatest changes I have seen in my time has not been in technology, but rather, relates to our growing appreciation that the reductionism that served us for 300 years is giving way to the more satisfying systemic approach to human health. The separation of mind from body that intrigued Galileo, for example, is no longer relevant, and the distinction between health of the mind and that of the body is nothing but a shibboleth. The ability to learn and discriminate, which I am sure has been a part of your education, will enable you to deal with all changes such as these.

I plead with you to try to avoid one of the banes of our professions. Too many of us are arrested at the level of binary thought and try to retreat into the comfort of rigid opposites. It will never help to contrast population health with the care of the individual. It will never do to seek to justify primary as opposed to secondary care. The division between vertical and horizontal health programs is useful only as an esoteric debating point.

I hope that you will, as I have, become seized with the importance of one of the greatest ethical issues of our time—that of equity. I know that those of you who have read the Hippocratic oath are well aware of your duties to your patients, and parenthetically I hope you observe that part of the oath that enjoins you to share your wealth with your teachers. I am sad to say that none of my students remembered that part of the oath once they had graduated—but I live in hope. But more seriously, you will I am sure, be inclined to think now of ethics in health as related only to the propriety of interpersonal interaction. I am convinced, however, that you will have to give increasing attention to the gaps that separate people and groups of people and question yourselves as to whether these are just and ethically sustainable. We have major gaps in health status between people and nations. The chances of a child in one of our poorest countries in the Americas seeing a first birthday are about 13 times less than here in this country, and there are many such differences. Some gaps or inequalities are unavoidable, but we refer to those that are avoidable and unjust as representing inequity. It is not only the gaps in health that must concern us, but it is the gaps in those factors that determine health that are also of critical importance. The gaps in wealth, in education, in environmental facilities, in access to information, all contribute to the gaps in health; and perhaps the most pernicious of all is the gap in health outcome based on gender discrimination. No society can be stable if these gaps in the essentials for human coexistence persist or increase.

Finally, let me be very personal and say that the most important lesson I have learnt has been that of the benefit of having a good partner. I cannot tell you how to find one, I can only wish you luck in the search, as I am convinced that the wholeness that is human health is enhanced within a partnership.

Thank you again, and the most fitting parting is the one I learnt in Jamaica---walk good my friends, walk good!