

XXXVI Annual Convocation of All India Institute of Medical Sciences

Delivered by

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Dr. Anbumani Ramadoss, Hon'ble Minister for Health & Family Welfare and President AIIMS, Shri R K Dhawan, Mr. Naresh Dayal, Prof. T D Dogra, Director, Dr. R C Deka, Mr V P Gupta, Faculty & Staff, Parents, Students, Distinguished Ladies & Gentlemen!

I would like to begin by expressing my gratitude for the honour that you have provided me by inviting me as chief guest and to deliver the convocation address on this occasion. The country and many people across the world hold the All India Institute for Medical Sciences in great respect, and those who have graduated from this prestigious Institute are providing outstanding service to humanity across the world as indeed they are in this country. It is also a matter, which in the larger national interest we should feel satisfied about, that several distinguished members of faculty of this Institute who have left or retired from service have contributed enormously to the establishment of other institutions and hospitals in New Delhi and in other cities. An institution like this can, therefore, be considered a fountain of knowledge and expertise that satisfies the needs of many more people far beyond those who have directly benefited from treatment or attention within these premises.

I would like to endorse the Hon'ble Minister Dr. Ramadoss' appeal to the graduates of this institution to serve in our country and not abandon these shores for opportunities and attraction overseas. I myself came back to India in 1975 while I had a tenure track position in a major University there, and my wife had an important position in a research organization. However, I was determined to come back to India, and despite the resistance of my family towards giving up what we had in the US. I can assure you that I have not regretted that decision one single minute. The action is here, and there is great joy in working in one's own country.

At the outset I should salute the Hon'ble Minister Dr. Anbumani Ramadoss in his mission to fight the widespread use of tobacco and the addiction to smoking. Smoking is clearly an evil and a major health hazard that every citizen of this country and across the world must join hands in stamping out. Doctors have a prominent role in social action just as they have at the bedside of a patient. I must also compliment the Hon'ble Minister for all that he is doing in the interests of spreading health care benefits to the deprived sections of our population. His leadership and vision are clearly inspiring and the drive that he possesses is an essential ingredient for success. But turning to this occasion, I find myself at a bit of a loss, because I am not a political leader and nor do I hold any official position that will qualify me for the honour that you are giving me today, unlike those who have preceded me in earlier years, but as a student of social phenomena I would

like to comment on a few issues of concern where society has great expectations of you.

Sushruta, the father of medical science in this country, and perhaps in the world, highlighted the benefits of clean living, pure thinking, good habits, regular exercise and special diets and drug preparations. He lived in a period when ailments were cured by the judicious use of medicinal plants and preparations derived from them as well as from minerals and animal sources. He in addition really introduced the world to modern surgery, but what strikes me in the direction that he provided through his thinking and work is embodied in his emphasis on proper lifestyles. We are today living in an era when lifestyle diseases are growing at an alarming rate. We cannot turn the clock back and go to the way of life practiced by our forefathers and ancestors, but I would submit that we have not succeeded in evolving changes in lifestyle that could withstand the pressures of modern living on human health. This, of course, is a failure on the part of society, but I think it also reflects the reality that medical specialists have not had an adequate influence in effecting social change. One definition of lifestyle diseases is to describe them as the result of an inappropriate relationship of people with their environment.

There is no greater example of this inappropriate relationship than the health challenges that we would face as a result of human induced climate change. The Fourth Assessment Report of the IPCC clearly brings these out and highlights their seriousness. For instance, it is projected that the health status of millions

will be affected through increases in malnutrition, increased risk of deaths, diseases and injuries due to extreme weather events. There would also be increased burden of diarrhoeal disease, increased cardio-respiratory and infectious diseases due to higher concentration of ground level ozone in urban areas related to climate change and the altered spatial distribution of some infectious diseases. Climate change will also result in higher frequencies and intensities of floods, droughts, heatwaves and extreme precipitation events. All of these also have serious health implications. Means by which human populations, particularly in the most vulnerable parts of the world, can adapt to these impacts will have to be led by medical science. Yet, so far an effort in this direction has largely been missing. We must remember that these burdens would be imposed on several existing stresses on our health. Indian still has a poor record of immunization, maternal mortality and nutrition. Our record of sanitation remains truly deplorable. To this situation we are adding stresses on account of climate change.

If I could generalize, in my view there has never been a period in human evolution and progress when the social aspects of medical science have assumed importance at the level at which we see it today. Specialization and hospital care appear to have overwhelmed the importance of preventive measures. Knowledge of the human system available to medical specialists and doctors makes it possible prevent disease to a much greater measure today.

May I also say that there is need for a revival of medical ethics. With growing incomes and ability of individuals and organizations to pay for modern medical care, I regret that there is an impression that medical ethics are under assault from within and outside the system. The oath of Hippocrates, some say is now an oath of hypocrites. It would be essential for the medical profession to alter this impression, and to ensure that medical training and teaching in medical institutions emphasizes ethics at every stage of learning and in every part of the curriculum. Equally important I believe is the need to build in a thread of social medicine and knowledge on the societal changes that are taking place worldwide and in this country, so that those who graduate from our medical institutions have the requisite specialized skills but also a well rounded appreciation of socio-economic changes and their own roles and responsibilities.

Like institutions in every profession in this country we also need to emphasize the need for improvement in management of medical institutions. I have worked in institutions in this country and in the US, on the basis of which I have learned a few things on this subject. I have had the unique fortune of building up TERI literally from scratch to a level where it has a major global presence, and a large size relative to other institutions working in similar fields. The one factor that I believe has helped me and my colleagues in this regard is the extent of freedom and autonomy that I have been provided and the support that I have received consistently from the Chairman and members of my Governing Council. But I have also ensured that I empower adequately those who report to me. Autonomy does not stop at the level of the Chief Executive of an institution; it has to be

delegated down the line. Far too many Chief Executives of academic and research institutions confuse firm leadership with autocratic behaviour. Authority can be exercised within a democratic framework. In fact a democratic leader is far more effective and much more successful than one who is not prepared to hand down responsibility and authority to those reporting to him. I believe that for the benefit of all institutions in this country we need a national debate on governance systems and styles for knowledge organizations.

Let me in conclusion say that the All India Institute is an inspiring example of vision exercised by the Government over 50 years ago and the dedication of remarkable professionals who have toiled and worked hard to create skills, knowledge and expertise founded on a spirit of service which makes you what you are today. May I salute you on this occasion and congratulate those who have graduated and urge those who are yet to graduate to reflect for a moment and feel proud of where you are. You are truly blessed and privileged, and society expects a great deal from you. I am sure you would all live up to the hopes that the country places on you.