



Icahn
School of
Medicine at
Mount
Sinai

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS 2024

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ICAHN SCHOOL OF MEDICINE AT MOUNT SINAI

Parents and grandparents; family and friends; Trustees and honored guests; faculty; and Class of 2024, it is my great honor to welcome all of you to the 55th Commencement Ceremony of the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai!

Class of 2024, you arrived here nearly four years ago when New York City was under siege. We had emerged from the first deadly wave of COVID-19, but the pandemic was still a lethal threat. By necessity, it disrupted your first year of medical school. Yet you rose to the occasion, handling the disruption with courage and dedication. Witnessing the extreme demands placed upon our physicians, you enthusiastically threw yourself into your coursework, well aware that before long you too might have to hunt for answers to a new mysterious disease or care for patients during a life-threatening viral outbreak. At Mount Sinai you will forever be known as the “Pandemic Class,” and I say that proudly!

This was the first of your many achievements here at Icahn Mount Sinai. You went on to demonstrate exceptional academic excellence and great promise as future physicians and research scientists.

Indeed, based upon what I know about the graduates of the Class of 2024, I predict you will provide the leadership to make fundamental discoveries in the laboratory and the clinic, leading to cures of the most serious diseases that plague humanity. And you will make sure that these advances help disadvantaged people throughout the globe.

This is a tall order. What evidence do we have that the Class of 2024 has the strength of character, the creativity, and the indomitable spirit to accomplish these goals?

Today’s Graduates:

- Made scientific discoveries that include helping us better understand the causes of multiple types of cancer and the genetic basis of mental illness.
- They made major contributions to therapeutic innovation involving RNA and DNA-based drugs, development of vaccines for cancer, and disease-modifying treatment for dementia.
- They have published over a thousand papers!

Today’s Graduates:

- Are advocates for human rights and social justice.
- They committed to health care equity for our local communities through our East Harlem Health Outreach Partnership.
- They volunteered more than 12,000 hours to the COVID-19 student work force!

Today’s Graduates are Resilient.

- Some rose above poverty.
- Some were raised by single parents.
- Some are first-generation graduates of college and, now, medical and graduate school;
- Some took care of family members facing medical challenges;
- And some served our country as part of our military, including as combat medics.

Class of 2024, I have great confidence that you have what it takes to become great doctors and researchers.

I know you will be the healer your patients and their families need.

I know you will guide them toward a meaningful recovery or a dignified death.

And, I know you will think outside the box when all else fails.

Scientists:

I know you will be bold and challenge convention.

And I know you will make discoveries causing diseases that are deadly today to become treatable tomorrow.

Moral and Social Responsibility:

Equally important, all of you graduate from Icahn Mount Sinai with a moral compass that has been strengthened by gaining a deep understanding of the social responsibility of the physician and scientist.

As you saw on your first day here, this is a responsibility we take very seriously at Mount Sinai. We have a moral commitment to deliver outstanding compassionate care to every patient. We pursue equity in health care because every human being is

deserving of good health and quality care.

Sadly, not all physicians and scientists have shared these commitments. Recently, articles were published in the world's two top medical journals, The New England Journal of Medicine and The Lancet, that are very troubling.

In a critical review of its history, The New England Journal of Medicine just weeks ago acknowledged that it had been a proponent of eugenics. It published hundreds of pro-eugenics articles, including editorials, during the first half of the 20th century. The New England Journal discussed eugenics as a movement whose goals "were in keeping with the proper mission of medicine." Editors applauded the "ever-increasing interest taken in the subject of racial betterment through the practice of eugenics."

Such misguided thinking fueled contempt for people with disabilities, immigrants, and the poor. It encouraged discrimination against Blacks. It provided backing for the introduction of sterilization laws in 31 states.

I was unaware, and now am horrified, that these articles existed in, of all places, The New England Journal of Medicine!

And, just a few months ago, the Lancet Commission on Medicine, Nazism, and the Holocaust published its damning findings, documenting horrendous facts—including that much of the German medical and scientific establishment was involved in the systematic torture and murder of six million Jews and millions of non-Jewish people.

Sadly, the United States has a history of unethical medical research—beyond the infamous eugenics movement. In 1932, the U.S. Public Health Service began a study with the Tuskegee Institute in which it withheld treatment for syphilis from hundreds of Black men, without their consent. Even after penicillin became the treatment of choice for syphilis in the 1940s, the men did not receive appropriate medicine for decades. This must never happen again!

And, there remains a gap between the American Dream—"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal"—and the American Reality.

We still witness discrimination against people of color, and currently we are observing an alarming rise in anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and anti-Asian racism. These are problems for all of us.

I strongly believe that, as physicians and scientists, it is our responsibility to be moral leaders. Not only must we oppose bias and racism in all its forms, but we must also stand against the

misuse of medicine and science.

There are role models for us to emulate.... physicians who stand out for their ethical work. Paul Farmer's social justice organization, Partners in Health, works with governments and local health authorities to ensure that those living in poverty are able to access quality care. Doctors Without Borders organizes humanitarian missions around the globe, providing quality health care to people in impoverished countries and in war zones.

I believe Mount Sinai—our medical school and health system—is a beacon for change, as evidenced by our commitment to anti-racism and health equity.

Our global health partnerships are improving care in Kenya, Nepal, Ghana, and Guyana. And here at home, the student-run East Harlem Health Outreach Partnership, in which so many of you have been involved and which is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year, provides free care to our neighbors in need.

Other examples of our commitment to advancing diversity, health equity, and anti-racism include our:

- Road Map to Address Racism
- Center for Multicultural and Community Affairs
- Center for Scientific Diversity
- Institute for Health Equity Research
- Institute for Equity and Justice in Health Sciences Education
- And the Center for Asian Equity and Professional Development.

There is no question that Gaza is in the midst of a health crisis. There is enormous suffering among all sides in this horrible conflict. And many of us have intense personal convictions on who and what is right, and who and what is wrong. But let's remember—in medicine and public health, we should adhere to our unique mission. We must focus on our expertise and do what we have been trained to do.... To care for all patients—no matter who they are—humanely and as best we can.

So, we should embrace our moral compass. Maintain our personal code of honor. And follow the simple advice of Mark Twain: "It's never wrong to do the right thing."

Class of 2024, your education has given you great power—the power to heal, to educate, to discover, and to correct injustices. You have the power to achieve so much good. I know that is precisely the path that each and every one of you will take. I know that you will make us proud by being a force for good in our world.

Congratulations!