



WHITE COAT ADDRESS, 2016
DEAN DENNIS S. CHARNEY, MD

2016 WHITE COAT CEREMONY

Dennis S. Charney, MD, Anne and Joel Ehrenkranz Dean of the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai and President for Academic Affairs of the Mount Sinai Health System, delivered the following remarks at the 18th Annual White Coat Ceremony on September 17, 2015, in Stern Auditorium.

The White Coat Ceremony marks the beginning of the academic year and welcomes first-year students into the medical profession. As students are helped into their white coats by faculty, they are reminded of the significance of their profession and their responsibility to balance scientific knowledge with compassion.

WELCOME to the 2016 White Coat Ceremony.

The donning of the universally recognized — and globally respected — white coat has been an enduring symbol of the medical profession's commitment to patient care and biomedical research for over 100 years.

Today, I talk to you as your Dean, and as someone who recently experienced a great personal trauma.

On the morning of August 29, 2016, just before 7:00AM, I walked into Lange's Little Store in Chappaqua, NY. Large iced coffee, plain bagel light on the butter — I am a regular — they know my order. I paid and left.

A few steps out the door, I hear what sounded like a bomb. The noise echoed in the sweet morning air.

I looked at my shoulder. Blood was pouring out.

I looked across the street. A man approximately 20 feet away was holding a shotgun.

Did I know him?

"I've been shot!" I yelled.

I ran back into Lange's, repeating this phrase (and maybe adding an expletive or two), according to witnesses.

A stranger guided me to sit on a staircase out of sight of my assailant. He told me I would be ok.

How does he know? Is he a doctor?

Wait a minute, I'm a doctor!

I performed a back of the envelope calculation: Alert, oriented, damage concentrated to arm and shoulder.... I don't think I am going to die.

A Lange's employee (and friend of my family), George, remained calm, he called for help.

Patrolman Tolliver arrived shortly after, providing compression to my wounds. Other policemen, especially Officer Frank Hrotko, at great personal danger went to apprehend the shooter.

Later, in the emergency room at Westchester Medical Center, it was found that I had numerous shotgun pellets lodged in the muscles and bones of my shoulder.

In addition, one pellet had punctured my lung, another had broken a rib, and a few were sitting on the surface of my liver. I was transferred to Mount Sinai Hospital in stable condition, where I recovered over the course of a few days before going home to recuperate.

This ceremony is the first time I have returned to work since the attack. During this time I have reflected on concerns, both great and small. The bonds we form. The choices we make. The paths we choose. Today, our paths cross. For a few moments, please allow me to share with you the perspective on the medical profession that I have gained through this recent attempt on my life.

Friends, today we gather to contemplate the role that these 140 men and women will from this day forth, be asked to play in society.

The doctor.

Students, I look out at your faces and cannot help but wonder. What winds blew you down this path, to this place, this room, this moment? What does being a doctor mean in your imagination?

Let me be the first to tell you — in the words of the immortal Bruce Springsteen, to be a doctor will require you to become "tougher than the rest."

Being a doctor consists of people coming to you in the crisis of their lives and asking you for the answers.

Being a doctor means living up to immense expectations of society.

At any hour, in any place, it is assumed if tragedy strikes there will be a doctor on hand to handle the case with grace and confidence.

Both physically and mentally, doctors are expected to stitch up the victims of adversity.

When epidemics emerge, when the unspeakable occurs, it often falls upon physicians to be first responders, to explain how, and why, even when it may be inexplicable.

Being a doctor means making sacrifices. When hard times fall upon your own life, family members and loved ones will often look to you as a pillar of strength. They will gauge how concerned they should be based on the look on your face. In these moments, it may not be clear who to turn to for help with your own private suffering.

Being a doctor means coping with loss and disappointment on a daily basis. Many of your patients will not get better. Some will die. Too few will be cured.

Sometimes, we lose one of our own.

Yes, being a doctor is tough.

Yet, let me also be among the first to tell you it can be incredibly rewarding.

In fact, the very same elements that make it difficult are often what make it worthwhile.

Yes, today too few patients will be cured. Sometimes, though, you will save a person's life. And some of you will make a discovery that will help many, if not millions of people. Granted, we all come into medicine expecting such moments to be more frequent than they are, but these moments exist. They are not a myth.

Yes, we will lose some of our patients. But we must learn from every death, and constantly strive to discover better therapies.

Yes, we are often called upon to show strength during professional and personal tragedy. This is both a burden and a privilege. To show strength, to show courage, to inspire those around us by demonstrating grace under duress — this is a gift unlike any in the world.

As a doctor, we are constantly exposed to adversity, and in adverse conditions one has the privilege to bear witness to heroic acts. When I was attacked, P.O. Davenport arrived at the scene soon after. He then came with me to the ER, though off duty, and waited in a chair at the entrance guarding the door until I was transferred to Mount Sinai several hours later. As we were leaving, my son thanked P.O. Davenport, who responded by giving him a firm handshake and saying, "I only wish I was in front of him when the shot rang out." P.O. Davenport was a total stranger. Not anymore.

You will have the privilege to bear witness to the miracle work of nurses, commanding the sickroom with purposeful concise movements, highly attuned to clinical subtleties that no textbook ever taught. And, of course, you will bear witness to the superhuman commitment of your physician colleagues to their patients. Rounding when they arrive at 5:00AM and before they leave at 10:00PM....

And spending countless moments in between checking, rechecking, triple checking lab values, surgical plans, imaging, vitals, medications, preparing for the slightest sign of clinical deterioration, hoping for signs of improvement.

Adversity reveals character at the level of an individual, an institution, a community, and even a nation.

In my case I bore witness to heroic actions of a community of individuals that came together, as part of our medical school and hospital. I owe enormous gratitude to Michael Marin, Chair of Surgery, who supervised my care, Raja Flores, Chair of Thoracic Surgery, Robert Lookstein, Director of Interventional Radiology, the

SICU physicians, Rupa Kohli- Seth and Adel Bassily-Marcus, the SICU nurses, especially Rosanna Del Giudice, and the housekeepers. I can never express enough thanks to the Mount Sinai security team, led by Chief Tim Burgunder and Annabelle Nieves, and the New Castle Police Department for immediately making my personal safety and the safety of my family a top priority.

Based on my experience as a medical student, doctor, researcher, a dean, and now as a trauma victim, these are things that I know.

I know These next four years of your life will be trying. It will be a challenge to find a balance between achieving success in school and fulfillment in other aspects of life. There will not be one right way to do it.

I know Once you have been in a room, looked into the eyes of a suffering person who wants you to have answers that do not exist or if you have those answers and save their life, you can never go back to who you were. There is no going back to who you were before you don this coat. If you were an artist before, you will still be an artist, but not the same one. If you were an athlete, you will still be an athlete, but not the same one. It will mean something different for everyone. But it will mean something. It is not a neutral decision, putting on this white coat.

"Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet, only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired and success achieved." Helen Keller

I know You only get one life, and in anything you do, what matters most, is that you have integrity and stand for what you believe in. As a doctor this isn't just a choice, it's a commitment we make to our patients when we wear the white coat. It doesn't symbolize being inducted into the elite community of doctors, but instead the induction into a community of everyday people who vow to live by a code of honor.

And finally I know ... Bad stuff does happen. A bad thing happened to me. You'll face tough times. If you stay the course — nose to the grindstone, eyes to the stars — ultimately you will emerge further down the road tougher than the rest.

For as Ernest Hemingway said, "The world breaks everyone and afterward, many are strongest in the broken places."