Shenandoah University PA Program Graduation Address
December 11, 2010

Thank you for that kind introduction. It is a real pleasure for me to be here to address you on this monumental day – Graduation Day. I want to thank you – the graduates – for asking that I be here to share a few thoughts. It is indeed an honor. I’ve been in PA education for 32 years now and I must share with you that I’ve had the good fortune to know your program director for the majority of my tenure in the profession. Tony has been a friend and mentor to me and my program. Over the years he has made us better as a PA program and he has made me better as a person by his example and mentorship.

President Fitzsimmons, program faculty, proud parents, family, and friends – good morning to you all.

And Graduates – well, you’ve been gone for over 2 years now. Immersed in your studies – learning the science of medicine, and I know from Tony and your excellent faculty you have also been learning the art of our discipline. I want to welcome you back – back to the world and I invite you to be part of the solution to our world’s problems.
Gandhi once said, “the difference between what we do and what we are capable of doing would suffice to solve most of the world’s problems”. I contend that you graduates, are in an ideal position to make the world a better place.

A few years ago my youngest son, Joey graduated from the University of Utah with a degree in philosophy. Anticipating, that with this degree he might remain at home for quite some time, my wife Kathy (also a PA) and I found a book for him – Best Jobs for a Better World by: Dr. Laurence Shatkin. To our delight, PAs were profiled highly in this credible publication that makes use of databases created by:

- the U. S. Department of Labor
- the U.S. Census Bureau
- and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Shatkin and his colleagues decided that jobs selected for their many lists should involve:

- helping people
- teaching people
- improving people’s health and well-being
- protecting people from harm
- or enriching people’s lives by advancing knowledge or creating works of art.
Even though all legitimate jobs do something to make the world better (paying taxes, producing products, and providing services) this book focused on jobs where the main job functions are activities that improve people’s lives. Over 200 jobs were determined to have the elements I’ve just described and PAs were specifically named consistently in the top ten and occasionally ranked 1st or 2nd on all of their lists.

I especially liked the list labeled, Best Jobs Overall Rated High on All Six World-Improving Criteria Combined, where PAs ranked 2nd. The criteria for this list also considered the categories of:

- Social Service
- Education and Training
- Fine Arts
- Medicine and Dentistry
- Public Safety and Security
- and Therapy and Counseling

Well, improving the world through your work is truly rewarding and satisfying. This will be inherent in your career as a PA, regardless of your specialty. So, inherent in the work you have chosen – is the core function of
improving people’s lives. But, I would challenge you - that you are also in a unique situation, not only will you make the world better by your work, (for which you will paid quite well, I might add), but the knowledge and skills you have attained will allow you to give back to society, in a substantial way – to communities that are less fortunate.

There is a quote that I like by President Woodrow Wilson

“You are not here merely to earn a living. You are here to enable the world to live more amply, with a greater vision, with a finer spirit of hope and achievement. You are here to enrich the world and You impoverish yourself if you forget that errand”.

This concept of giving back is also highly profiled in the Physician Assistant Oath you’re are about to take, namely and I quote:

“I will use my knowledge and skills to contribute to an improved community” – and you will pledge this with sincerity and upon your honor.
Now – I feel a bit like I’m preaching to the choir here since I know your faculty and know of your fine work as students in serving the needs of those less fortunate here in your own community of Winchester and also in the country of Nicaragua. In fact, a few weeks ago – I had the pleasure of hearing from your faculty as they gave a very comprehensive discussion to a national audience about this international mission program and I’m proud to know that some funding over the years has come from the PA Foundation’s Global Humanitarian Outreach endowment established by my wife Kathy and I in honor of my father who recognized the importance of connecting with those of other countries and cultures. On your mission trips you have been caregivers, teacher, learners, and true ambassadors for our profession. I would dare say that the explosion of PA Program development globally is a direct result of the pioneering efforts involving international rotations by PA students.

To underscore the importance of international involvement I would like to share an excerpt from a letter written to the Utah PA Program, my Program, on the
occasion of our 40th Anniversary a few months ago. It's from the Back Pack Health Worker Team project, which, since 1998, has operated in the conflict areas of Eastern Burma. Our Program has had the honor of interacting with the Back Pack Medics (true PA analogues) for a number of years through our student rotations along the border between Burma and Thailand. The “Medic”, is a job category that does not exist officially in Burma or in Thailand, but only exists along the Thai/Burma border. The Burma Medics were born out of a need to provide access to care for the estimated one million internally displaced ethnic minority groups escaping a brutal, oppressive Myanmar military dictatorship.

This message to us was from Nang Snow, Deputy Director of the Back Pack Health Worker Teams in Mae Sot, Thailand:

I quote:

“While the genesis of the physician assistant programs in America emanated from the combat medics and corpsmen of Vietnam, it is hoped that our work in the remote and conflict areas of Burma will allow us to make the same transformation from
combat medics to compassionate care givers when Burma is finally at peace and free. We are “Lifesavers Now”, but fervently hope to become “Caregivers Tomorrow” as you have done. Unfortunately at this moment, our Back Pack Medics face disease, landmines, arrest, beatings, and death in providing needed health care to our peoples in Burma. Many of those combat medics and corpsmen present at your celebration are quite familiar with this situation. So we also share a heritage of personal risk, but also one of courage”.

End quote.

These Burma Medics have the opportunity to be officially declared refugees for the political persecution they suffer. They can apply to relocate to another country, but they elect to stay and serve their people. This is truly courageous.

Nang’s letter speaks to the present dire circumstance in Burma and along the border – it also draws a parallel with our own professional roots as Physician Assistants. As the Veteran’s Caucus of the American Academy of Physician
Assistants proclaims – we were lifesavers during the Vietnam War as medics and corpsmen and today we serve our patients as caregivers:

*Lifesavers Then – Caregivers Now –* as the Veteran’s Caucus motto goes.

Our rich military heritage should be remembered and celebrated. As you know, medics and corpsmen serving in the Vietnam War were the original substrate for PA training. These veterans, who provided lifesaving medical care under harrowing conditions, were the inspiration for and the first enrollees in physician assistant educational programs across the country.

To combat the very real social problems of gaining access to care in the late 1960’s, the physician assistant movement in the United States effectively utilized the clinical skills acquired during tours of duty abroad by these self-sacrificing individuals. Medics and corpsmen, with their extensive practical experience and additional training as physician assistants, have significantly increased the availability of needed primary health care
services in rural and inner city communities in this country and around the world. It is my hope that our profession will keep “service to the underserved” as one of its basic tenets.

Unfortunately our world continues to struggle over differences in ideologies and outright inhumanities continue to occur. When called upon, military medics, corpsmen, and now Physician Assistants continue a noble tradition of standing read to save and to heal – placing themselves in harms way. We should not forget the sacrifices they have made in the past and the sacrifices they continue to make on a daily basis around the world, and we should not forget the unique history of the creation of the physician assistant profession – your profession. A grand social experiment that began in the 1960’s, with its origins firmly rooted in the military medical ethos. Your profession can only be viewed today (some 45 years later) as a resounding success.

In the beginning, our fledgling discipline was advanced by individuals who were not afraid to take the risks necessary to create a new profession. They charted the
course of this experiment that, for the first time, allowed non-physicians to provide physician services. It was envisioned that this new profession would be dedicated to helping the medically underserved of our country by providing critically needed primary health care. Physicians, educators, social scientists, and legislators worked together in the early years to create funding streams and quality educational offerings.

Utilizing returning medics and corpsman, providing them with an intense education, and imbuing them with the attitude of “service before self” in team practice with supervising physicians, was indeed a formula for success. You are the beneficiaries of this legacy and you have a solemn responsibility to collectively assure that the original intent of our work is not lost on our ever-changing health care landscape.

As a clinical-year PA student, I had the good fortune to train in rural Blackfoot, Idaho with a solo practice Family Medicine physician, Bud Miller. In turn, his father, also a Generalist physician, trained him – and so it goes. Some believe that with sufficient scholarly effort, it would be
possible to trace a lineage from the individuals who have played a pivotal role in one’s clinical education all the way back to Rene Laennec or even to Hippocrates. The point is:

We owe a great debt to those who have been involved in teaching us the science and art of medicine. Your faculty has insured that you have the skills and abilities necessary for a successful career. Be thankful for the gifts of science, of mentorship, of hands on learning. Likewise, be thankful to your patients who have allowed you the time necessary to practice your craft. You have learned through the suffering of others. I would hope that you are humbly grateful to them as part of the reason you are here today – making this transition from a receiver of clinical training to a giver of clinical service. As you enter this most exciting and challenging aspect of your career and fully immerse yourselves in the care and comfort of those seeking your skills, please remember the words of Sir William Osler who once said:

“A distressing feature in the life which you are about to enter is the uncertainty which pertains not alone to our science and art, but to the very hopes and fears which
make us human. The practice of medicine is an art, not a trade; a calling, not a business; a calling in which your heart will be exercised equally with your head”

So, enjoy and respect what you are about to become involved in – this practice of medicine – and remember, as Dr. Miller often told me while training in Blackfoot – he’d say “Pedersen, access to care doesn’t mean having an unlisted phone number”.

Nearly 40 years ago now, while training in Blackfoot, Bud would also tell me that – “far more often, you will win the undying gratitude of patients with a simple, four-word question”.

The situation will always be the same. This only happens when you are 5 patients behind and you are grateful to see a problem so simple that you can't understand why someone would even bring it to the doctor’s office. You've finished the encounter – and you’re leaning towards the door – and then you see a look on the patient’s face – a look you’ve seen before – and you know it is time to ask the question – but if you do, it will cost you your lunch
hour. And, he’d say to me, “by God Pedersen, if you’re going to be a real PA you’ll ask it anyway.” And the question, simply:

Is everything else OK?

Now today, I understand there will be a White Coat Ceremony. This cloaking ceremony is a symbol of your transition from classroom to community and if you’ll permit me, I would like you to think of the white coat they cloak you with today as a “cloak of compassion” – so, whether you end up wearing the white coat in your practice or not – bring this – “compassion” with you every day to your practice – to your patients and to their families and everything else will truly be OK.

• you came together as strangers
• you endured as friends
• you will part today as colleagues
• you were carried by the love of your families and the “significant others” in your life
• and I know you will serve as compassionate caregivers

An African proverb states that “if you want to travel fast – travel alone. If you want to travel far” – travel in a group.
Well, you have traveled far and, lord knows, it has not been fast – but you did it together. My hope would be for you all – to retain the “esprit de corps” developed over these years of education. Rely on each other and support each other in your careers – as you did in PA school. Stay connected, and also stay current and competent. Your profession demands this of you. In the 16th century it took 100 years for scientific knowledge to double. Today the estimate is 2 years. This is a daunting statistic, but you have the knowledge from your education to pursue “best practices” in our new “evidence-based medicine” paradigm.

It is also my hope that our future health care system will transform from its present “high tech” – “low touch” approach to one that values the more cognitive aspects of our calling. Remember, your patients will judge you on the quality of your character not on the quality of your technology. You are in the perfect position, at the ideal time to contribute to a transformation of a system that seems, at times, to lack a conscience, to a system that puts the patient first and recognizes that doctors and PAs need
to be free to help patients make the best decisions regarding their own health and well being. Just like the founders of our profession, who had the courage to challenge the system, know that the future and our profession is in your hands.

Be advocates for your patients – our most solemn responsibility, and embrace your opportunity to serve.

You know - institutions and organizations have mission statements to guide them through the years, through troubled time and times of success. I would encourage you all to develop your own “personal” mission statement. Think it through, write it down, post it on your wall, refer to it when times are tough and especially, when times are good. Use it as a compass; use it to maintain a balance in your life. It will help you find your way back when you sense you are off course.

- What do you care about
- what do you value
- what makes you happy
- what gives you satisfaction
- what do you want out of your career, out of your life?
Winston Churchill once said “we make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give” – I believe this, and I hope you include in your “personal mission statement” the “giving” of the skills and abilities you now posses in the service of others. The Buddha said, “teach this triple truth to all: a generous heart, kind speech, and a life of service and compassion are the things which renew humanity”.

As Physician Assistants – what we do is important, what we do matters:

• to our patients
• to our communities
• to our nation
• and to our world

I would like to close with a poem by Will Allen Dromgoole that, I believe, sums up what I’ve been trying to communicate, it’s about a bridge builder and goes like this:
An old man going a lone highway
Came in the evening cold and gray
To a chasm fast and deep and wide.
The old man crossed in the twilight dim,
The sullen stream had no fears for him,
But he stopped when safe on the other side,
To build a bridge to span the tide.
“Old man,” said a fellow pilgrim near,
“You are wasting your strength with building here;
Your journey will end with the ending day,
You never again will pass this way.
You’ve crossed the chasm deep and wide,
Why build you this bridge at eventide?”
The builder lifted his old gray head,
“Good friend, in the path I have come,” he said,
“There followeth after me today
A youth whose feet must pass this way.
This chasm which has been naught to me
To that fair-haired youth might a pitfall be.
He, too, must cross in the twilight dim;
Good friend, I am building the bridge for him.”
Your faculty members have built a bridge for you to a new career. A career that will make the world a better place. I petition you - to do the same in the years to come. Use your skills and abilities to build bridges for the next generation of PAs. And build bridges for your patients.

Bridges to:
  better health
  better lives
  and better futures.

Thank you and God bless you.