

It is a truly humbling experience to be asked to say a few words on behalf of such an illustrious group of honorary graduates. As the holder of a single somewhat modest undergraduate degree, obtained after spending rather less time working than on what seemed to be more important activities, I feel spectacularly under-qualified to be standing here, but on my own behalf and on behalf of my new colleagues may I thank the University for its generosity in awarding us its degrees.

And many congratulations to all the proper graduates who actually have had to work for their qualification – and to those who have supported them doubtless through thick and thin to get to this day. As the proud parent of a recently qualified doctor myself, I have been where you are sitting and my advice is – enjoy today – you deserve it!

But more than congratulations I want to thank all of those who have evidenced today their calling to be medical doctors and to devote their careers to a most noble profession.

I asked my son what, with the benefit of his experience to date, would be his advice to those graduating today. This was his reply:

*“I guess the most important advice for any junior doctor is to do everything possible to ward off cynicism. It makes us bitter and terribly dull! Make people look forward to coming on shift with you and you're half way to an easy life”*

I think that captures quite well the spirit of what I wanted to say to you myself, based on what I have observed not only through a career in looking at things that have gone wrong in medicine but also from developing throughout my life an intense admiration for the dedication of the vast majority of professionals to their patients, and the skills and courage which have led to such immense advances in treatment. We only have to recall the achievements of the great alumni of this University to evidence that.

It is well known that poor actors become barristers. At school I played Dr Blenkinsop in GB Shaw's play the Doctor's Dilemma, in which a knighted doctor with a prosperous Harley Street practice proudly boasted that:

*When you know as much as I know of the ignorance and superstition of the patients, you'll wonder that we're half as good as we are.*

His friend replied:

*We're not a profession: we're a conspiracy.*

To which the riposte was:

*All professions are conspiracies against the laity. And we can't all be geniuses like you. Every fool can get ill; but every fool can't be a good doctor: there are not enough good ones to go round.*

GB Shaw, who was not a man short of words, expanded on this notion in his preface to the play:

*... doctors ... are full of stories about each other's blunders and errors, .... for this very reason no doctor dare accuse another of malpractice. He is not sure enough of his own opinion to ruin another man by it. He knows that if such conduct were tolerated in his profession no doctor's livelihood or*

*reputation would be worth a year's purchase. I do not blame him: I would do the same myself. But the effect of this state of things is to make the medical profession a conspiracy to hide its own shortcomings. No doubt the same may be said of all professions.*

An exaggeration of course perhaps even when he wrote it – particularly if he was referring to lawyers... but there is a grain of truth. Think of the “club culture” described by Sir Ian Kennedy in his report of the Bristol Royal Infirmary Inquiry, the reluctance of colleagues to think that Dr Shipman could be doing anything wrong, and latterly the way in which doctors may not have spoken up about the standards of service being offered in Stafford Hospital.

Sometimes it must seem to the medical profession it is under siege. Tales of so-called “blunders” are an everyday event in the news. The requirements – and charges – by professional regulators increase every year. The demands of something called “management” for ever more productivity persist. Patients demand more and more based on the wisdom of the Internet. The temptation to flee these shores for warmer climes and apparently more congenial working conditions must loom large.

But my plea to you is, please resist that temptation. We need you for your skills, your commitment, your compassion and everything else that makes medicine a profession and not just a job.

Medicine is not alone in being a profession which feels it is under attack. Just look at what teachers experience. And as for lawyers – well no one is ever going to give us any sympathy so I will not try!

When people feel they are under attack one instinct is to withdraw, put one's head down, and “get on with the job”. That is what happened at Stafford, and I fear in many other places where poor standards of care have been uncovered recently. It is easy to develop a negative state of mind about the pressures which will surround you as you work.

However may I suggest that much of the solution to all this lies in your hands – you the professionals who actually know what patients' needs are, and are trained in the skills required to meet them.

In these challenging times, we the patients need you to be true professionals, not as described by Mr Shaw but as highly skilled practitioners committed to putting the well-being of your patients as your highest priority.

I think that being a true professional today requires a number of attributes over and above the technical skills and knowledge to do to job:

- *Openness, transparency and candour*: no medical care can be provided effectively without the trust and active involvement of your patients. That requires openness with them: listening to what they say and want; explaining diagnoses, treatment options and possible outcomes; ensuring they understand this and proceeding in agreement with them. It requires candour when things have not gone as anticipated. It requires an understanding that when apparent mistakes are made not only must they be acknowledged, but every necessary step taken to learn from them. Patients rightly expect nothing else. Today there is a developing understanding about the human factors which conspire sometimes to cause error. Professionals, the public and dare I say it, lawyers need to play their part in replacing a blame culture with a learning one.

- *Teamwork*: professionalism requires a willingness to work effectively with others to provide the treatment and care your patients need. That means teamwork. Whatever area of medicine you work in you will have to work with others. That will not be successful unless colleagues from all sorts of disciplines respect each other, and unless you contribute constructively and sensitively to discussions and decision-making.
- *Leadership*: all healthcare professionals are leaders, even an F1 doctor entering the ward for the first time. He/she has a professional responsibility to ensure the well-being of the patient and to participate in the leadership of the team providing for that. It does not mean a James Robertson Justice sort of leadership, barking orders at over-awed nurses, but a leadership which motivates everyone to work together. It means respecting and responding to fellow leaders, in other professions, and working together.
- *Insight*: none of us are immune from making mistakes. There are plenty made in the NHS. In 2013/14 £1.1 billion was spent on clinical negligence claims. Worldwide it is thought 1 in 10 patients suffer avoidable harm from treatment. All of us can always learn more. Not only is it necessary to draw attention to concerns about the practice of others where patients might be at risk, but to have the humility and insight to welcome colleagues raising concerns with you. Everyone has to cooperate in the investigations and processes that lead to learning. All too often colleagues who raise honestly held concerns get rebuffed and even victimised. That is not what members of a profession constantly striving for excellence should do.
- *Engaging with the wider system*: I believe that a true medical professional can no longer fulfil the duty to their patients simply through the treatment they provide at the front line. These days all doctors need to play their part in the running of the organisations in which they work, and in the wider work of their profession. How each individual can contribute will of course vary, but common to all is the need for all doctors to speak up for their patients and to help organize their service within the resources provided. So when doctors believe that there are insufficient staff available for the safety and dignity of their patients, it is no longer acceptable to shrug one's shoulders and think this is someone else's job. It is everyone's duty to raise such concerns and do whatever is possible to see that the problem is solved. I fear that many professions have forgotten the power they have if they speak with one voice, not in their own personal interests but in the interests of their patients. If they speak up in a considered and evidence based way they have to be listened to, whether by CEOs, Boards of Directors, commissioners or even government ministers.

This may all sound daunting, but believe me, if you cherish the ideals that brought you to this point and nurture them as you go through your career, you will not only ward off the cynicism my son warns of, but you will have the most enviable and rewarding time for the rest of your lives.

On behalf of my fellow honorary graduates, may I wish you every success and once again offer you our thanks in advance for everything you are going to achieve for your patients and your profession.