



## OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

# COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI'S LEONARD M. MILLER SCHOOL OF MEDICINE COMMENCEMENT

Presented by President Julio Frenk at the University of Miami's  
BankUnited Center on May 7, 2016

Greetings, Class of 2016!

What an honor it is for me to be part of your graduation from medical school—a remarkable feat borne of hard work, tremendous learning, and a commitment to helping others. Dean Pascal Goldschmidt, I share the pride that you and the entire faculty of the Leonard M. Miller School of Medicine feel in our graduates and in marking this milestone. The Miller School is one of the strongest pillars of the University and our community. I am very proud to be the first physician to serve as president of this great University.

Like spring itself, the notion of commencement speaks of the fresh sensation that one phase is about to end and another to commence.

As you stand at the threshold of your future, it is instructive to turn your thoughts back to that defining moment when you knew you would become a physician.

We all have different reasons why we decided to study medicine. Most of you have chosen to pursue the care of patients. Some of you will go into biomedical research. I took the path of public health.

But digging deeper down, we all have our stories, and my own professional journey clearly illustrates the lasting impact of a moment seized and a life's work revealed. Although the choice to study medicine took shape over several years, there was one distinctive experience, one turning point that crystallized my decision.

I grew up in Mexico with a strong sense of indebtedness... a need to give back to society. This feeling was borne out of the experience of my paternal family, who were forced to leave Germany in the 1930s. They escaped to a much poorer country, yet one rich in tolerance and open to diversity, which welcomed them with open arms. That country—Mexico—saved their lives and made my own life possible.

Until I was 16, I did not have a clear idea of where my sense of indebtedness would lead. I decided to spend the summer before my last year in high school living in a very poor indigenous community of the state of Chiapas in Southern Mexico.

At the time, I was trying to decide whether I would study medicine, like the three generations of Frenks before me, or anthropology. I went to Chiapas because there was a famous anthropologist working in this little town, and I wanted to see him in action.

One day, while sitting in a health post with the anthropologist, a very poor woman came in carrying her grandson in her arms. It was very cold—we were way up in the mountains—and she had walked more than three hours to get this sick child to the town's clinic. While traveling, she had injured her head, so when she arrived, she was completely covered in blood—in need of care for herself as well as her beloved grandchild. And there was no one. The person who took care of the health post was not there, and the anthropologist couldn't do much to help. And, of course, neither could I. *Neither could I.* For me, this was the turning point. I remember thinking: *I am not only going to study these people, I am going to serve them.*

Many of you have such stories. The facts may differ, but the dynamic is the same. A personal experience plants the seed for something far greater. We are moved to engage with—and transform—the larger world.

Each of us faces a fundamental choice between indifference and caring. Then—once we have decided to care—we must choose where to focus our efforts.

For me, medicine was the obvious first choice. And when I finished my basic medical training, I decided that I would study public health, so I could deal not just with the consequences but also with the root causes of poverty and injustice underlying the plight of that poor woman and her grandson.

Each of us has a story. But what unites us is that we are all searching for our own place in the world. By rejecting the inertia of indifference, we are finding our own meaning and redefining our own role in the world, so that we can make a difference.

You are now about to enter a new phase in your vital journey, and you are plunging midstream into a changing and demanding world. Simply put, you are in transit to a world which is itself in transition.

Your own personal change coincides with one of the most intense and intensive health transformations in human history. What are the transitional forces shaping your future?

The transition is rooted in a veritable health revolution that began at the dawn of the 20th century, accelerated after World War II, and continues unabated to this date. This revolution produced the largest gain in life expectancy in all of human history, which was accompanied by a complete transformation of the dominant types of diseases that afflict humans. While in the past illness was experienced as a succession of acute episodes, from which one either recovered or died, today most people suffer from chronic diseases that accompany them for significant periods of their lives.

In parallel to this epidemiologic transition, the 20th century also launched a health-system revolution through the expansion of social institutions exclusively devoted to the crucial functions of preventing ill-

ness, treating disease, and taking care of the sick. For the first time in human history, we saw a mammoth undertaking on the part of a specialized health system focusing solely on these functions.

The result is that today you are joining the largest sector of the largest economy in the world. The U.S. health system absorbs roughly one in every five dollars of the Gross Domestic Product, which comes to a mere \$8.2 billion dollars... *per day!*

The crucial point, though, is that the American health system is presently undergoing its most profound change since the advent of Medicare and Medicaid 50 years ago. No health reform—past, present or future—is perfect, and the Affordable Care Act is no exception. But the fact remains that the United States is the site of one of the most extensive experiences in implementing large-scale transformation of a health system anywhere in the world.

And while this change is significant from a U.S. perspective, it is also very important from a global point of view. Knowing that you are a truly international group, no matter where you go, understanding what is happening in the U.S. is vital for everyone.

The first major change is the increased access to health care thanks to expanding insurance coverage provided by the Affordable Care Act. Secondly, we are also seeing the transition from a volume-based to a value-based health system.

As I said at my inauguration, only those health systems that successfully navigate these shifting waters will succeed in the future, and I am certain the University of Miami will lead the way in this new era.

In essence, your time at the Miller School of Medicine has coincided with nothing less than a revolution of the U.S. health system. You should feel deeply confident. At the University of Miami, you have received a wonderful legacy that will grow in you and will help you deal with the challenges ahead.

As I am about to finish my first academic year as president, I am more convinced than ever before that we need to transform higher education, because universities are essential institutions for the 21st century. In particular, health professional education has to keep pace with the rapidly changing health-care landscape.

A few years ago I had the opportunity to co-chair an international Commission on the Education of Health Professionals for the 21st Century. This high-level group published its report in the influential journal *The Lancet* in 2010, to mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Flexner Report, which established the modern basis for medical education not only in the U.S., but around the world.

The Commission realized that, given the intense changes I have outlined, we need to also transform the character of medical education. Until recently you could be a very good doctor if you mastered the content of your practice. In this new era, however, you must master not only the *content* but also the *context* of your practice.

As educators, our first duty is to help you become experts who know a lot about your field, but that is not enough. We must also educate you as professionals. A professional is an expert who has internalized an

ethical framework and a code of conduct oriented toward service. But even this is no longer enough. It is our duty to also educate change agents, who can understand and help improve the larger health system of which they are a part.

These educational responsibilities correspond to three successive levels of learning outlined in the *Lancet* report: informative, formative, and transformative learning. Informative learning is about acquiring knowledge and skills, and produces experts. Formative learning is about building an ethical framework and a code of conduct, and produces professionals. Transformative learning is about developing leadership competences, and produces enlightened change agents.

This is what your education at the Miller School of Medicine has prepared you for. You have the knowledge, skills, values, and leadership attributes not only to succeed in your own practice, but also to make the world healthier for more people than has ever been possible.

Class of 2016: You are the reason why, even with all the uncertainty and dynamic changes we face in charting the future of health care, I remain fundamentally optimistic about our capacity to face the increasingly complex set of challenges. Your role is to not only adapt to but to actually shape the new era of health care that is literally unfolding as you graduate.

Most of all, never forget that, in the midst of all its complex organizational and financial realities, the core of any health system is the unique and fraught encounter between one set of people who need services and another who have been entrusted to deliver them. Through your expertise, your professionalism, and your leadership, you will shape many such encounters for the benefit of your patients and society.

In her insightful book *Illness as Metaphor*, the great American writer Susan Sontag reflects on the fact that we all have dual citizenship, both in the kingdom of the healthy and in the kingdom of the sick. You must help others mediate those two kingdoms with diligence, dignity, and compassion. You can help to create that sense of belonging I have been talking about, so that we all feel included, respected, and valued—in sickness and in health. You must challenge yourselves to walk in the shoes of your patients, immerse yourselves in the evolving social and cultural landscapes of your communities, and always, always, lift the human spirit above the chaos and despair that illness often engenders.

Class of 2016: Look around you. Look to your left; look to your right. You are surrounded by an amazing network of humanity. These are the colleagues, the mentors, and the collaborators who will challenge, inspire, and support you in the rewarding and challenging years ahead.

Keep in touch with each other. Sustain your relations. Stay in contact with your University and celebrate its successes as lifelong alumni—because your Alma Mater will, in turn, celebrate your amazing achievements throughout the exciting journey you are about to embark on.

Congratulations!