

Good Afternoon – and congratulations to the Albany College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences graduates of 2014- you made it, this is your day!! All those years of hard work have finally paid off.

And likewise, congratulations to your friends, family, and the essential supporting cast of the Albany College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences: trustees, professors, administrators and staff, as they all share in your success.

What an honor and delight for me to be a part this day of celebration with you.

Graduates please take the time to savor your achievement, and be sure to thank those who helped you get here. Whether it's a bear hug for the family, an email to a professor, a tweet, a post or a high five to your fellow students, it's important to acknowledge that it does indeed take a village.

As I considered today's message, I had to go back to my own experiences several decades ago. I remember the days of my internship at Boston City Hospital; the joy and terror of being a real doc. BCH, now Boston Medical Center, was one of the old standby public hospitals run by the city of Boston. And while I remember my amazement when the elevator operators had to step out to make room when we brought in a patient on a bed, one of my most vivid memories was of Carey.

Carey was a kind and soft-spoken guy who joined us on hospital rounds. Frankly, I had no idea why he was there. His thoughtful, directed questions and gentle advice about drug therapy for my patients were essential to my success – and my survival. No surprise, he was a PharmD, and I hope that all of you get to experience the satisfaction of that sort of mutually

respectful relationship in your own careers. The true beneficiary of this relationship- the patients.

That began what has been a lifetime of appreciation by Dr. Chen the emergency physician, the hospital administrator, the legislator and now the Health Commissioner, of the value **your** knowledge, skills and relationships bring to the health care system. Whether it is cost effective care, safe care, or effective transitions of care, the roles you take in your professional career will be important to our collective success.

Drugs are a miraculous therapeutic intervention. They can save lives and money, but we know they can also hurt patients and waste precious health care dollars. Your role is to work with the team to achieve the triple aims: better care, better health and lower costs. You can do this with the patients through medication reconciliation and counseling and with the prescribers through collaborative practice and academic detailing. The menu of options grows larger and larger as pharmacists continue the transition from technician to provider.

“Pharmacy Dave” is another important connection I have had in my career to your future profession. Dave (I still can’t remember his last name) is one of the many fine folks in the pharmacy at Rutland Regional Medical Center who could answer – or find the answer – to those tough drug questions much more quickly and pleasantly than my PDA (now i-phone) ever could. In emergency situations, we can’t afford the luxury of ignorance or inaccuracy. When it came to aminoglycoside or anticoagulant management- nobody did it better than them.

Like Dave and his colleagues--always be ready to apply what you have learned for better results for our patients, and don’t

be afraid to say “I don’t know” while you work your magic figuring out the answer.

Secretly I have to admit taking advantage of Dave while not even at the hospital but working in the Rutland free clinic, scratching my head trying to figure out the best next step in a patient’s antihypertensive therapy.

Sadly, I can also remember a time when I sure could have used a Carey or a Dave.

It was 2010, three months after the tragic earthquake in Haiti and, like many of us in healthcare, I felt the need to help. I was part of a volunteer organization running the Emergency Department in the University Hospital in Port Au Prince. Our medical tents were set up in the courtyard of the old hospital destroyed by the earthquake.

Of course there was no running water, much less linens or AC, and in the 100 degree heat, the image of the line of patients waiting to be seen that went on for blocks was an intimidating sight. An indelible image in my mind was the pharmacy of our clinic. Cabinets stuffed full of drugs in unfamiliar containers, with labels in many different languages and drug concentrations of unimaginable variety. Just think of how much fun you could have had there or, in all seriousness, what tremendous value you could have brought to a bad situation.

That reminds me of a guiding principle in my life that has paid off in spades – giving back. Get involved and give back to your community wherever you go. It’s your community and you can help define its identity. It absolutely doesn’t have to be as a pharmacist – coach a team, tutor a student, hey, you can even run for office! Some of my best friends are politicians.

Being a state legislator was an incredible opportunity to bring together my love for my adopted state, my commitment to contributing to the well-being of its residents, and the knowledge I'd gained from my years in Emergency Medicine. Some of my most important policy and legislative work related to evidence-based cost effective prescribing. One bill regulated marketing by requiring disclosure of payments to prescribers and banning gifts to physicians. Another, augmented Vermont's- one of the first in the nation science-based Academic Detailing program by pharmacists and physicians at UVM.

My motivation for these efforts came in large part from my experience with pharmaceutical representatives wielding food and gifts – along with what I saw as undue influence – marketing drugs that some of the time had little added value. It comes down to finding an appropriate balance between science, medicine, and profit in pursuit of the public good. Given the increasing portion of our GDP (20%) that goes to health care we must consider financial stewardship an important value.

Giving back feels good, enriches the soul, and I hope will remind you of where you spent your last several years – in the special place called Vermont, with its strong community values. By the way, if you can't stay, by now you know the best times to visit – please do so often. If nothing else, I'm sure you'll never forget the view of the lake and the Adirondacks from your classroom windows.

Another Vermont value that I am particularly proud of as Health Commissioner **of** one of the healthiest states is taking care of yourself.

It doesn't take a genius to see the mind-body connection. It's easy to see the toll that tobacco, unhealthy eating, and physical inactivity takes on body and soul, and the damage it has done to our patients. I urge you not to repeat their mistakes. And importantly, you can't give to others if your "tank" is empty, so be mindful of the need for balance in life beyond work.

In preparation for today, I polled several Vermont pharmacists, who work in different settings and are in different stages of their careers. I asked them what they wished someone had told them at this point in their lives – not they would have listened!

Here are some of the themes that emerged:

Your first job is just a beginning. It's unlikely to be your dream job. According to some, we don't really start hitting our stride until we have been doing something for 10,000 hours or somewhere between 5-10 years. That applies if you are a hockey player, a neurosurgeon or I suspect a pharmacist. Never stop learning, keep getting better, and get to know yourself as a professional- this will help you find your dream job.

In your new jobs you will be leaned on more than you expect, both by health care teams and by patients. In the clinical world, pharmacists are often the link between patients and doctors that ties care together. This is particularly true during transitions of care, where the pharmacist may be an important constant. When patients are confused they will look to you as their "port in the storm." Seize that opportunity to keep care on track.

The world before you will be very different than it was yesterday, and even what it is today. So never, ever be afraid to say I don't know or ask for help. In fact, a well thought out question is often the best tactic to get another member of the team to see it your way. Your integrity and knowledge are essential to establish effective relationships; this means being confident and even bold when you do know the answer, but not trying to fake it when you don't.

You already know that health care is in a state of nearly constant rapid change, and the same can be said of your chosen profession. You will be challenged by the pace and nature of change. The fact is, that when it comes to medications as therapy, there is no one better equipped than pharmacists to help manage care to achieve the best outcomes. This means that you are uniquely prepared to ride the wave of change. As you do so, never lose track of the patients' best interests.

As health commissioner, my concern is often not about each and every individual patient, but rather about working for the best possible health outcomes for the population of Vermonters as a whole.

Public Health refers to work that occurs both in and out of the doctor's office. And while I'd like to think I can do it all from a soapbox like this podium, I know that success comes from collaboration, system and environmental change. The importance of Public Health is clear- it's estimated that 25 of the 30 years of longevity we gained in the 20th Century were due to improvements in Public Health!

Here are some of the challenges I need your help in overcoming:

Antibiotic overuse leading to antibiotic resistance and Healthcare Associated Infections- We have bugs that have no effective drugs, and thousands of Americans are affected by or die of Clostridium Difficile each year. You can be an effective voice in our system with both prescribers and patients.

Check out the “Get Smart” program from CDC to encourage antibiotic stewardship. It is estimated that a 30% reduction in antibiotics can reduce C. Diff by 26% and make progress toward elimination of CRE! We have to be wise stewards of important drugs like antibiotics wherever we practice in health care.

Opiate abuse and overdose-Vermont, like the rest of the nation, is in the midst of an opiate crisis. The Governor’s State of the State Address merely served to highlight the issue in a way to move it from the backyards to the frontyards. The rate of drug overdose deaths nationwide has tripled since 1990 and more Americans die of drug overdose than from crashes on our highways.

VPMS – the Vermont Prescription Monitoring System – or your state’s prescription drug monitoring program - is your friend, and is an important tool that has no value unless it’s used. So please take the time to learn about it and use it.

Recently, it was an alert pharmacist who figured out the scam in VT where a person was fraudulently calling in a prescription for buprenorphine from out of state for over a year. No one expects you to be a DEA agent, but you have a unique vantage point and the knowledge to sense if something doesn't seem quite right.

Finally, stay tuned for continued efforts to make naloxone, a lifesaving intervention that reverses opiate overdoses, more available to the at risk population. You will likely be at the center of many such initiatives and others that can make a real difference in health outcomes, like safe storage and disposal of controlled substances.

Infectious Diseases- Vaccines are a cornerstone of public health and prevention. They prevent thousands of illnesses and deaths and save millions of dollars each year. They prevent diseases most of you have never seen, like polio and measles.

Sadly, we are seeing a resurgence of some of these diseases. Some of our challenges are a direct result of our success- Why would you want to give your kid all those shots for diseases you have never seen? Unfortunately the world is too small and we are seeing them again. We need to redouble our efforts and raise immunization rates. As pharmacists, you are trained to administer vaccines and often can do so at a time and place much more convenient for the patient. As such, you are essential to our success in protecting the health of the population.

Health Surveillance- is an important finger on the pulse of the health of a community. Your reporting and data is essential. Whether it's an adverse reaction to a drug or vaccine, these are important systems that monitor and ultimately ensure patient safety. You also have a unique perspective to observe trends in the abuse of drugs, and disease outbreaks in your communities. Pay attention to what is going off the shelf and who is buying them. Don't forget to let someone like the local health officials know when you notice something that concerns you.

To succeed in your career, you have to show up at work, be engaged and pay attention. Don't be afraid to make decisions- and when you do, follow through. When appropriate, be bold and courageous. Don't hesitate to stretch outside of your comfort zone. It has been my experience that the stretch oftentimes brings the greatest job satisfaction.

My parting advice to you is to keep dreaming and follow those dreams. Serendipity is a powerful force that has played an important role in my life; use it to your advantage. Be ready for opportunities – and say yes when they present themselves.

I have no doubt that an interesting and exciting future awaits you. You are well prepared to engage in that future, just remember to do it with kindness and gusto!

So warm congratulations to the class of 2014 and your supporting cast; this day marks your remarkable achievement- A joyous end that marks a promising beginning.

Enjoy, be well and good luck!!

Harry Chen MD- 5/19/2014