

Commencement Address
University of Maryland School of Pharmacy

Joshua M. Sharfstein, M.D.
Secretary
Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

May 17, 2013

Good morning -- and congratulations. It is an honor to be able to share in your celebration today.

I have a great view from here.

I can see the pride on the face of Dean Eddington.

I can see the broad smiles of the faculty.

I can see the joy of so many friends and family -- or is that relief? No, it's joy. I can tell it's joy.

And I can see the excitement of today's graduates ... who after so much time and study are poised to enter a wonderful profession.

I am a pediatrician, and I must admit .. that my deep respect for pharmacists came the hard way, after a difficult morning on rounds at Children's Hospital in Boston.

As we walked around the unit, we learned that I was responsible for a medication error on every single one of my patients. Wrong antibiotic choice. Wrong IV fluid order. Wrong dose of insulin...not good. Even though there had been no complications overnight, I felt like an utter failure. When we reached the room of my last patient, I had to assure my team that there was no way I could have messed up again...because my patient was not on any medications.

Her only therapy for a flare of Crohn's Disease was ENSURE to avoid bowel obstruction.

Suddenly, her father burst out the room and yelled, "Who gave my daughter ENSURE with fiber?"

It was then I became fast friends with the pharmacist on the team. There is nobody like a pharmacist to help choose and dose a medication correctly. There is nobody like a pharmacist to help think through the risks and benefits.

Let's face it. There's nobody like a pharmacist.

When you graduate into a healing profession, you go from needing others ... to others needing you.

As a pharmacist, whether you listen to and connect with a patient in need could mean the difference between successful therapy and a bad outcome.

But that's just one part of what you now have to offer.

You can advance the health of your community, by working with a poison control center, developing a medication therapy management program, helping control hypertension and diabetes, and keeping your friends and neighbors well immunized.

Back when Medicare Part D launched on January 1, 2006, I was the health commissioner of the city of Baltimore. I was concerned that the transition to the new benefit could be catastrophic for thousands of Medicaid patients who were forced to switch coverage ... and I turned for help to ... our city's pharmacists.

We met and strategized. In one of my most exciting moments on the job, I was permitted to go behind the counter to see what Medicare Part D would look like from a pharmacist's perspective.

It was awesome.

OK, maybe not as awesome as an ambulance ride-along.

But still pretty awesome.

I still remember the exact place, the pharmacists who were with me, the sights, the sounds, the smells...the sense of supreme power.

I digress.

The Health Department set up a 24-hour call line for pharmacists to alert the city in case a patient could not get needed drugs. And pharmacists called. And together we helped many patients stay on needed treatment.

In addition to serving your community, as a pharmacist, you can advance the health of your city and county and state and country, by helping health systems choose wisely among many products ... and by finding creative ways to improve the outcomes and lower the costs of health care.

In the State of Maryland, our Medicaid program relies on some terrific pharmacists to manage pharmaceutical policy fairly and efficiently.

I used to work down the road at the Food and Drug Administration, where pharmacists work throughout the agency establishing and enforcing high standards for medications, including generic drugs. Some of the critical research to understand and improve these standards is conducted here at the University of Maryland School of Pharmacy. Developing new ways to encourage the safe and appropriate use of medications can save hundreds of thousands of lives in the United States and around the world.

Let me conclude with a few words on professional responsibility.

You serve others and reflect well on your school ... and make Dean Eddington proud ... not only by your own accomplishments ... but by your integrity and by your commitment to make sure others in pharmacy abide by the highest standards too.

Recently, thousands of Americans including many in Maryland were exposed to tainted compounded drugs from the New England Compounding Center...and scores died. Others are in grave pain and are suffering. There are major changes needed to prevent this kind of public health disaster from happening again.

Pharmacists -- even those who had nothing to do with these difficult events -- must not be bystanders in this discussion. You know better than anyone else the danger that can result from gross contamination of sterile products. You can develop and enforce the standards that can prevent this kind of outbreak from happening again.

In fighting for a strong compounding law in Maryland, we had no better allies than Dean Eddington and the faculty here. But our law now needs to be implemented effectively. And every voice is needed in Washington, D.C, to urge Congress to give further authority to FDA for greater oversight across the country.

In medicine and other healing professions, advancing professional integrity is not always popular or easy, but it is at the core of the responsibility you accept today.

OK, from my great view here, I can now see from the faces of all the younger siblings in attendance that it is time to move on with the program.

So all that's left is a prescription:

Feel proud of what you have accomplished ... stat.

Look forward to what you will yet do for your patients and community ... qd.

Smile and laugh ... qid and as needed.

And in celebration with those you love, take in a great meal ... po.

Thank you and good luck.