

## 5 Minute Talk 2005

I'd like to thank the Dean for allowing me to address you today. I brought the idea up to Dr. Masha Pyle about a week ago, and she said, "Here's the Dean right now, let's ask him." And he said, "Sure, you can have five minutes." So here we are.

I wanted to start out with a question—Where have you heard this quote before?—"With great power, comes great responsibility." That's right, the Spider Man movie. Like Spider Man, you have the opportunity to do great things, to make a difference in people's lives. To effect their health in significant ways. How do you get to this point?

Ahead of you are four years of intense dental education. You'll learn a lot of information, and actually, you'll forget a lot of information. The analogy is that all the facts are like leaves on a tree, but the important concepts are like the branches on a tree, and the tree trunk itself. What you'll leave here with, is a solid framework, a foundation for making clinical decisions. You'll know what questions to ask and how to put information together to make a plan.

What can happen, though, is that the work gets going, and soon you just want to game the system. You start to ask, "What do I need to know for the test?" "What do I need to know for the quiz, or for the final exam?"

I hope you'll counter-balance this perspective though and ask—"What are the three most important concepts in this lecture? What do I really need to know to be the best dentist I can?" Or better yet, ask, "How can I link this information to a larger context? How does this relate to clinical care?" Why is important? Because then you're learning for yourself; you're not just jumping through hoops.

The basic sciences are not just a necessary evil you have to go through in order to get into the clinic. You're building an arsenal, a set of tools to solve clinical problems. Take for example, a red growth on the inside of the cheek. You can be a biological detective—and ask, "Why is it right there? What's happening in the epithelium? What's the biochemistry behind that? What are the mechanisms? What could cause this? So you can ask the right questions and work backwards to deduce the cause and then work forwards to develop an individualized plan, one that's unique for that patient.

How will you do this? By being able to integrate information across disciplines. You should be seeing more and more of this during your dental education. But it's also up to you. You have to keep an open mind. You have to be curious and look for those connections. You have to put in the effort to build a three dimensional framework, so you can follow your hunches, and instead of dismissing questions, you'll be asking questions.

What does this require? I would say it requires humility. You have to be humble. Confident, yes, but humble as well. If you think you know everything, then you're blind to the questions. If you don't ask the questions, then you've already dropped the ball.

What can also happen is this: You get to the clinic and become seduced. Seduced into thinking that you just want to be a "competent technician" [BLINDERS]. You're focusing just on the teeth. But then you're missing the big picture [EXPAND hands out]. You're missing the soft tissue, the person, their habits—you're missing the 3 dimensional perspective, the clinical reasoning that you could be developing. And your patients will know the difference. Are you treating them, or are you treating their teeth? They'll know.

Here at Case, you'll see a broad range of patients. Some may be struggling to make ends meet, or may be on Medicaid or have a disability. When you interact with them, pretend that they are your mother or your best friend. Be grateful that they have entrusted their health to you. Respect that, and be their advocate. Why? Because if you do this, then you'll be open enough to helping them as much as you should.

Like the Dean said, set high expectations for yourself. Strive to integrate the art and the science of dentistry. Think of yourself not as being perfect, but as someone who is working towards excellence. Be someone who continues to ask, "How does this work? How can I make this better or how can I do this better?" If you can do this, then you will really be a doctor. If you can do this, then you will be fully engaged with your patients.

With great power, comes great responsibility. You have a great responsibility to your patients, but also to yourself. How you do what you do here, in this school, determines the kind of dentist and the kind of person you will be in the years ahead.

You all have drive. You had to, in order to get here. But if you use that drive just to be competitive, to beat out the other person, I think this is an empty path. But if you forge that drive with humility, with gratitude and with curiosity, then, not only will you be successful, but you will also be satisfied. And in your heart of hearts, you'll know that you are an excellent dentist, a true doctor. And your patients will know it, too.

Thank you, and welcome to dental school!