May 29, 2019

Dear Einstein Community:

In this, my final dean’s letter of the academic year, I would like to use the occasion of last week’s outstanding commencement celebration to reflect on our students and the first-class education that they receive at Einstein.

It was, as you all know, my first commencement at Einstein since becoming dean. To say I was both thrilled and humbled is an understatement.

Both before and following the ceremony, my mind wandered back to the tent in our campus’ Central Courtyard, where my own class of ’82 received its diplomas 37 years ago. (As most of you know, I was joined by fellow classmate Steve Safyer.) I recall the tremendous excitement and trepidation I felt and questions I had about my future. What will my residency be like? What new techniques will I master? What more will I learn? Will I have what it takes to succeed?

When I walked on stage for this year’s commencement—along with our distinguished faculty, board members, donors, and other leaders—I felt tremendous pride in our most recent graduates. They are, I believe, the best of the best and I marvel at their many accomplishments and limitless future.

A Time of Turmoil

In recent days, I’ve also been thinking about the journey our students have taken over the past four years—events on campus and off that have shaped their experiences in our corner of the Bronx. It occurred to me that Charles Dickens’ A Tale of Two Cities aptly captures the climate in which we currently live. Dickens begins his novel with one of the most famous lines in literature: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” While many tumultuous events have occurred over the last four years, this time has also provided opportunities for us to come together and demonstrate our mettle—with individuals meeting challenges in inspiring ways. Thus, I believe there is great hope in our future—both in our new graduates’ promising careers and in the fate of our nation and the world.

Shortly after members of the class of 2019 arrived on campus, we elected our most diverse Congress—until the election of 2018—and a reality-show host and real estate developer defeated our first major-party female candidate for president. News from Europe was also groundbreaking, as voters elected to have the United Kingdom exit the European Union. Since then, we’ve witnessed dramatic changes to our healthcare system and two government shutdowns—the first of which led to a reduction in grants from the National Institutes of Health. The Kavanaugh hearings concerning our most recent Supreme Court appointee led to discussions of sexual assault and the trauma caused by such acts, as well as the #MeToo and #WhyIStayedSilent social media movements. And, of course, the recently released Mueller report raised critical questions about how our nation is governed.
Activism focusing on social justice issues sprang up across the nation, with protests involving women, black lives, striking teachers, taxes, science, sexual violence, and sensible gun laws to end the senseless violence that has besieged our nation for many years. I am proud that many members of our community have been involved in giving voice to these issues as proponents of social justice—which has deep roots at both Einstein and Montefiore—with the goal of making our world a better, healthier place.

Sadly, senseless violence backed by hatred of those who are “different” continues to occur on our soil and abroad. In the month leading up to graduation, there have been mass shootings or other violent attacks in New Zealand, Sri Lanka, San Diego, Charlotte, North Carolina, and outside Denver. From our vantage point at Einstein, they have also made clear the links these issues have to mental health, trauma care, and the overall health and well-being of our society.

**Health Challenges**

Another key determinant of our health is our environment—although some in our society repeatedly deny, despite overwhelming evidence, the human causes of climate change. Numerous regulations to protect our water, air, national parklands, and environment have been removed even as record-breaking temperatures and the number of days with hotter temperatures increase each year. Torrential rainstorms and flooding, more-numerous occurrences of hurricanes and tornadoes, and increasingly violent wildfires have dominated the news during the past four years. All these events, of course, have dramatic impacts on human health.

From a healthcare emergency perspective, the Zika epidemic in the Americas and Africa in 2016 raised concerns about the harm the virus can do to pregnant women and their developing fetuses. Researchers at Einstein were among those seeking insights into the cause and possible therapies to combat the virus. In June 2018, we reported that Dr. Steven Almo and his colleagues at Einstein and Pennsylvania State University found that the compound called ddhCTP disrupts the replication machinery of the Zika virus. Their findings were published in *Nature*, and a team of researchers is now testing the compound against a broad array of viruses. Significant findings also were made by Drs. Kartik Chandran and Jonathan Lai, who, along with their international collaborators, discovered the first human antibodies that work against all forms of the Ebola virus.

Einstein’s direct involvement in helping the medical profession better understand and solve other health-related issues continues unabated. For example, researchers at Einstein and Montefiore took part in the groundbreaking Trial Assigning Individualized Options for Treatment (Rx), or TAILORx trial, supported by the National Cancer Institute, part of the National Institutes of Health, and designed and led by the ECOG-ACRIN Cancer Research Group. Our own Dr. Joseph Sparano had a leadership role in the study, whose results, reported in 2018, showed no benefit from chemotherapy for 70 percent of women with the most common type of breast cancer. The findings will help inform treatment decisions for many women with early-stage breast cancer.

Also, researchers in our Gruss Magnetic Resonance Research Center have shared important findings concerning the effects of soccer heading. These include the fact that heading itself, and not collisions, is more likely the cause of cognitive impairment experienced by many players. The research also established that while heading may cause concussion symptoms in soccer players of both genders, it more adversely affects the brains of women.

A health issue that our graduates will likely encounter during residency is the current measles outbreak. In our blog, *The Doctor’s Tablet*, Dr. Stephen Baum explained how we must confront this disease, despite the fact that the U.S. was declared measles-free in 2000. The outbreak also teaches us that, even with progress, we sometimes encounter avoidable setbacks.
Looking Toward a Bright Future
These research findings and clinical observations demonstrate the opportunities that lie ahead for our new physicians and scientists and remind us that science is never static. We are constantly gaining knowledge and information that will inform us and lead to new insights and approaches for healing and, hopefully, curing illnesses.

As I shared with you last year, when I set out for my residency 37 years ago, HIV and AIDS were not fully understood, and techniques for addressing heart disease were in their infancy. I had a ground-floor view of important advances in these fields—and so will our graduates, though the diseases and disorders may differ. For example, while great strides have been made in treating HIV/AIDS, there’s still more to discover—as is evident from the fact that Einstein and Montefiore, together with CUNY, received $9.4 million from the NIH in 2016 to lead a study of HIV/AIDS care in Central Africa.

Great discoveries, in medicine and in science, are always taking place. While all will not be in one’s field of study or discipline of practice, they may still offer opportunities. Just a few months ago, an Einstein alumna—Dr. Francine Garrett-Bakelman—was first author on a Science paper detailing a study of the Kelly twins, astronauts who underwent extensive testing while one stayed on Earth and the other spent a year in space. This research shed light on what life in the universe beyond our planet might look like.

I have no doubt that our graduates will face many such golden opportunities, and that every one of them will have the chance to contribute to improving human health and to providing treatments that help patients in new and important ways. If any of us are looking for inspiration, we need look no further than to our commencement speaker, Dr. Sanjay Gupta, who is a living example of someone who is doing good work—communicating to the world about critically important health issues, while continuing to serve his patients as a neurosurgeon.

In Closing
This past year has been educational and invigorating for me, as I hope the past four years have been for our class of 2019. It’s particularly exciting that these new graduates will be the first to receive diplomas from Albert Einstein College of Medicine—a milestone that fittingly occurs on the 60th anniversary of our first graduating class.

Our superb faculty and diverse Bronx community have sought to provide a broad range of learning experiences, grounded in the values of social justice that are our legacy. As a result, I believe our students are well prepared to face the brave, new world that awaits them and to embrace the challenges that lie ahead.

Please join me in congratulating our new graduates and wishing them a future filled with discovery and achievement, as they work to better our world through their many clinical and research endeavors.

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