

Commencement Address, University at Buffalo School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences

Mary Woolley May 3, 2013

President Tripathi, Dr. Cain, members of the Board of Trustees, faculty and administration;
proud, happy and relieved parents;
family and friends.

it is a high honor and a great privilege to stand in your company and to address you as we
pay tribute to these distinguished graduates.

It is distinction in itself
that the graduates have been trained and mentored
by the faculty of the University at Buffalo School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences.

By the work of its faculty,
the School has advanced its reputation and increased its academic luster,
earning accolades for research
that saves lives,
restores health,
and enhances the quality of life.

I salute all of you faculty and staff,
who have contributed so much
to the health and well-being of people around the world
and whose research has assured a healthier future for us all.

I am focusing on research in my remarks
because research has something very important in common
with those we celebrate today.

YOU, the graduates, are the future of healthcare, . . .
and so is research.

I want to link you and research as tightly as I can,
because I believe that you, and research, must advance together.
You and the research you learn from.
You and the research you apply.
You and the research you demand.
You and the research you do.
Together, you and research represent everything we hope for.

Together, you are our hope for healthier families, healthier communities, a healthier, more
prosperous nation and a healthier, more prosperous world.

I'd like to tell you a story about physicians and research.
Actually, two stories.

The first is about my grandfather.
He was a GP in rural North Dakota.
He was absolutely devoted to his practice and his patients,
leaving the state only twice in his long career
– once to visit Alaska,
and the other time to see Las Vegas.

He was not overly impressed with either place.

I think this was because neither place was truly important to him.
Neither glitz nor even nature mattered to him
as much as his patients.

My grandfather was dedicated to his community
and he was in every way an accomplished man,
albeit more than a little intimidating.

He was also a chain smoker.

Based on the experience of his practice
and based on his own long and healthy life,
he believed it was appropriate to recommend smoking to his patients,
so he regularly prescribed smoking
to help patients reduce stress and lose weight.

For all his dedication,
his accomplishments,
and his fierce intelligence,
he never accepted the power of the research being done about smoking.

In the 1960s, he rejected the then-emerging data
on the dangers of smoking,
and even quit the AMA in protest!

The emerging research confronted him with an unacceptable possibility --
the possibility that he may have contributed to the ill health of his patients.

And that possibility was not something he was willing to entertain.

When his granddaughter (that would be me)
confronted him with the data
He rejected it with a stubbornness that sprang his Norwegian heritage,
and a desperation that sprang from the fear
that he had violated an oath that meant everything to him.

It was not a happy experience for either of us.

But it was an important one.
And it taught me a great deal.
It taught me about the power of research,
It taught me about the costs of research,
It taught me about the resistance to research, even among
the fiercely intelligent,
and it taught me how much I loved my grandfather.

The second story is about the beginning of my career.

In my first job out of graduate school,
I worked for what was then the largest-ever clinical trial sponsored by the National
Institutes of Health, the NIH.

The hypothesis was
that intervention to reduce risk factors
like smoking, high blood pressure and high cholesterol
in a large population of otherwise healthy men,
would be proven to significantly prevent
morbidity and mortality from heart disease.

One of my responsibilities was to oversee recruitment of the study population;
to find volunteers willing to engage for six years.

This was not a trivial task; many thousands of volunteers were screened.

I trained recruiters how to ask many questions of the volunteers,
and also how to answer questions that the volunteers would ask.

And it's one of those answers that makes this story connect to my grandfather.

One of the questions that volunteers for the study would sometimes ask
was whether women could volunteer as well as men.
And I trained recruiters how to answer that question.
I trained recruiters to explain that women were not eligible for the study
because it was unnecessary to include women in the study.
I trained recruiters to explain that whatever results were discovered
in a research study of men's health
would apply equally to women's health.

We were convinced
and we convinced others
of what was,
without question,
a complete absurdity.

There were no studies to support our position that research into men's health
would apply equally to women's health.

We had no evidence.

We had no data.

And it's not as though we had no reason to question ourselves.

It's not exactly a shocking revelation that women's bodies are different from men's.

My grandfather had more cause to assume that smoking was beneficial than I had cause to assume that whatever was found to be true for men would apply equally to women.

I have had a lot of years to think about the moral of these stories.

Or, rather, the morals, plural.

You might reasonably say that one moral of the stories
is that we can count on research

-- at least eventually --

to discover errors and correct practice.

After all, it is the very function of research

to show us where we've been wrong;

to upend conventional wisdom

and muster the evidence to break new ground.

We're smarter about smoking than my grandfather was;

we don't exclude women from research

as investigators did in the 1970s and 1980s.

Indeed, we can count on progress;

we can count on getting smarter.

But I don't think that this is the only moral of the stories.

The other moral, I think, has to do with research, and being comfortable.

Because I see a deep similarity between my grandfather, and me.

Now, I don't claim to have anything like my grandfather's dedication to his patients.

And I don't claim to have anything like his fierce intelligence.

But we were more alike than I imagined on that day when

I confronted him about smoking.

After all, he, as well as I, believed in research.

Or, at least, we believed that we believed in it.

But we were much more ready to believe in research

when it was comfortable for us to do so.

And we were ready to ignore it when it wasn't so comfortable.

My last story today is another story about research, and being comfortable.

This one is taking place in real time.

Right now

our nation is in the throes of a nonsensical,

never-intended,

but nonetheless very real process of "sequestration".

It is a process that stipulates ten years of annual funding cuts to a wide range of federally supported programs including research, as conducted and awarded by the NIH, the NSF, the CDC, and other science agencies.

“Sequestration” is Washington-speak for mindless, across-the-board, spending cuts, cuts that very few Members of Congress will say are a good idea.

In fact, most say precisely the opposite, both behind closed doors and in front of the camera, depending on their message.

If they want to blame the other political party for sequestration, they are happy to publicly label it a patent absurdity. If they see the responsibility of their own party’s leadership or ideology, they aren’t as forthcoming, but that doesn’t mean they see it as any less absurd.

They say that sequestration is an abrogation of their responsibility to prioritize and oversee tax-payer provided funding; and they are right.

The Chairman of an important Congressional Committee told a small group of us recently that as sympathetic as he is to the case for funding the NIH, the NIH, and other good causes, will just have to wait until the economy revives and the nation gets spending under control; only then can we invest more in research.

He had an air of resignation about him in saying this; and he is not alone.

It made me a sad, and not a little infuriated, to hear him say “we’ll just have to wait.”

That’s not a message a physician wants to deliver to a patient who is hoping for a breakthrough, hoping for a cure. “You’ll just have to wait” sounds like a defeat.

Bowing to sequestration as an inevitability is a view widely shared in Washington, and a view that is being repeated around the nation.

Let me spell out what it means to you if we accept sequestration as an inevitability.

It means defeat.

It means not a one year cut in funding,
but ten years of cuts in funding,
and these come on top of the previous ten years of flat funding.

It's been calculated that by the end of sequestration
we will be back to the NIH of thirty years ago:
vastly underpowered to exploit the scientific opportunity of today,
much less the opportunity of tomorrow.
Already, some investigators who have perfect scores on their NIH grant applications
have been told they will not be funded;
most research projects are being cut in some way;
some institutions are imposing furloughs,
others are freezing hiring,
others have gone straight to lay-offs,
still others are choosing all of the above.

And because research is being cut,
cancer patients are being turned away
from treatments only offered in clinical trials;
the nation is losing our battles with Alzheimer's and obesity
even as we continue to add to the ever-escalating cost of health care,
costs accelerated by diseases that research,
given a fair chance, can unravel.

So what does this giant, political story have to do
with the small, personal stories of my grandfather and me?

I think they are all stories of how research is linked to feeling uncomfortable.
In all three stories, you can see what happens to research
when we draw the line
between what we feel comfortable with,
and what we don't feel comfortable with.

Research goes ahead gang-busters when it makes us comfortable.
Very often, we're very comfortable in saying that we need more knowledge
We're not uncomfortable admitting that we need more knowledge.
In fact, we like setting ourselves the problem of creating new knowledge
because however challenging it is to create new knowledge,
we know how to do it.
We've been steeped, for years,
in school, college, medical school,
in the methods for creating knowledge.
We've been trained to create knowledge.
We like it.
We're good at it!

And like most humans, we're comfortable with the things we're good at.

But then there are the things we're not comfortable with.

The real threat to research today,
the very, very real danger that research will falter,
is that it confronts a problem that we are not comfortable with.

Research faces a problem that we're not steeped in,
a problem that we're not trained in,
a problem we're not good at,
a problem that makes us uncomfortable.

The problem isn't scientific,
the problem is political.

And the greatest danger is that we-- we here -- we, in this place --
are uncomfortable in the political realm.
We're not comfortable speaking up.
We're not comfortable becoming an advocate for research.

And because we're uncomfortable, research is in peril.

What we need today, in the battle to end sequestration,
is for all of us to be willing to be a little uncomfortable.

In battle against national decline,
which is a battle for your beloved profession,
what we need is the passionate advocacy --
yes, I mean the POLITICAL advocacy--
of the most persuasive members of the population
– you, physicians and researchers.

Everyone except the science community itself seems to know this.

President Obama addressed the National Academy of Sciences
on Monday of this week; he delivered a significant charge.
He said, and I quote, "I'm absolutely convinced
that if this Academy and the successors
who become members of this Academy
are there
at the center and the heart of our public debate,
we'll be able to continue to use the innovation
that powers our economy
and improves our health,
protects our environment and security,
that makes us the envy of the world."

President Obama knows that
it is not enough for HIM to talk about research,
it is not enough for him to say that
“the essence of America is the hunger to innovate,”
that “only the federal government can escalate discovery,”
that the sense of wonder and discovery are no less than “who we are as Americans”.

It is not enough for him to speak
because he is not a scientist,
he is not an expert.
He is not an insider.
He has a powerful voice, but his is not the voice of research.

The President knows that
the voice of research is your voice.
And he knows that the battle for research cannot be won without your voice.

Note that “if” in the President's statement:
“IF the members of the Academy –
and by extension
IF the scientific community –
IF YOU
are at the center and heart of our public debate,
only “then” we will be assured of the continued prominence of science.

That "if" speaks volumes.
That "if" shows that the President knows that he's asking us
to do something we're not comfortable doing.
That "if" shows that that President knows what public opinion polls tell us at
Research!America –
scientists are invisible in our society today, and invisible to the Congress.
Scientists are most definitely NOT at the “center and heart of our public debate.”

In fact, the voice of research is too often absent even from the very edges of public debate.

Think about it:
Have you ever been encouraged to meet or even contact your member of Congress or
Senators?
You would not be alone
if you have been DIS-couraged from doing so,
by people who believe science is best served
by staying away,
far away,
from politics.

Here is the danger.

Good people,
with the best intent,
give us a reason
to remain comfortable.

We're uncomfortable engaging the political
We're uncomfortable speaking out,
We're uncomfortable joining the public debate.

So today, I say to you: "be UNcomfortable."

I urge you to shed your disdain for politics and policy-makers.
I urge you to use your influence
to assure that hope stays alive
for those who struggle with disease and disability,
whether their own or that of a dear friend, colleague or family member.

I urge you to speak for research
so that research retains its ability to deliver on that hope.

I urge you to become advocates for the future of health;
advocates for research, yes,
and also advocates for policy change.

Stand alongside your patients
when they are advocates;
support their work,
join their causes.

And stand on your own;
stand for yourselves;
stand for medicine,
stand for research.

Yes, it will be uncomfortable, at first.
Yes, you will do something you are not steeped in,
Yes, you will do something you are not trained in,
But no, it is NOT true that you will not be good at it.
I have seen, countless times, a scientist, who was willing to become the voice of research
and found that she was very, very good at it.

But one thing is sure,
we cannot abandon our responsibility toward research
merely because we are uncomfortable.

Whether it was my grandfather,
or me,
or any of us here today,
research is too important
for us to turn away from it
merely because we are uncomfortable.

Thirty years from now,
when your granddaughter asks you
what you did for the health of this nation;
thirty years from now,
when you give a commencement address,
I hope you will recount
how you and your colleagues found a vaccine for HIV/AIDS,
how you eliminated health disparities;
how you put malaria and TB in the history books and defeated the obesity epidemic.

And I hope you will describe with pride
how you served as an advocate for research,
how you used your authority to speak with a voice
that no politician--not even the greatest orator --
could match.
how you stepped into the heart and center of public debate
because it was necessary for you to do so,
and you could do no less.

I salute you today and I salute your future.

I'll be watching with pride and in eager anticipation of hearing your voice in Washington, as well as here in Buffalo, or wherever your life's work takes you.

Thank you.