

**Commencement Address
University of Maryland School of Public Health**

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Graduates, family, friends, faculty– what a great day, and what an honor to be here with you.

The School of Public Health at the University of Maryland, under the leadership of Dean Gold and now Dean Clark, has been a tremendous partner for the advancement of health across our state.

Your active involvement and support has been essential to the establishment of the health enterprise zone in Prince George’s County.

Your wisdom has guided the community health expansion to accompany the construction of a new academic medical center.

You are promoting understanding of the roots of illness and the factors that need to be addressed to lift up individuals, families and their communities into health.

For all this, and so much more, on behalf of Governor Martin O’Malley and Lt. Governor Anthony Brown, I can say that the State of Maryland is deeply grateful.

I congratulate the student speaker Felicia Davenport, on her graduation and her speech today.

About 20 years ago, when I was graduating from medical school, I was selected as the student speaker.

My speech was not quite as inspiring as hers, however.

As background, our Dean of Students was a distinguished psychiatrist. Here's how I started my speech.

“Commencement is a wonderful occasion -- but let's face it, in a few hours the party will be over. This tent will come down, these chairs will be put away, the Dean will have to put his clothes back on...and then what?”

I'm not sure he ever forgave me for that line.

The theme of my speech about 20 years ago was what four years of medical school had really trained us to do. I explained that other than recite facts and make lists, not much. Still ahead were years of clinical training before we would feel comfortable calling ourselves doctors.

The question I would like to pose today is similar – what have you learned at the School of Public Health? And I would also add a second question – why do you all seem so happy about it?

After all, there are some out there who accuse all of us in the field of public health of being dour and miserable kill-joys.

They think that Schools of Public Health are little more than training academies for aspiring nannies marching off to work for paternalistic government agencies.

In their minds, your curriculum includes:

- Public Health 101: How to take all the pleasure out of eating and drinking.
- Public Health 201: How to turn any conversation on any topic into a discussion of antibiotic resistant sexually transmitted disease.
- and, for graduate students -- Public Health 301: How to take all the pleasure out of eating and drinking ... merely by discussing antibiotic resistant sexually transmitted disease.

Yet seeing so many smiling faces, it is obvious that the cynics have it wrong.

Public health graduates are all about enjoying life.

The premise of public health is that the well-being of individuals, families, and communities has fundamental moral value. When people are healthy, they are productive, creative, and caring. They enjoy life and have fun with their friends and families, they strengthen their neighborhoods, and they help others in need.

In short, they get to live their lives.

Flowing from the fundamental moral value of health is the injustice of disparities in health. Too many around the world, in our country, and in our state, do not get to live their lives.

Poor health knocks them from their life's trajectory. Kids drop out of school. Parents drop out of the workforce. Families slide back down the ladder of opportunity. Communities fall apart. That these burdens disproportionately affect low-income and minority populations is a national shame.

In your training at the University of Maryland, you have learned to measure health, identify disparities, and ... most importantly – design and implement solutions.

You can now use data to understand the problems that cause suffering and death. You can build support within communities for change. You can try out solutions and see if they work. And you can succeed.

And there are opportunities for progress all around us.

- Advance tobacco control. You are literally helping people breathe. You stop heart attacks from ever happening. You prevent cancer.
- Enhance neighborhood access to healthy food, safe streets, and places to exercise. You are supporting hundreds or thousands of people in avoiding chronic illness. You reduce blindness, amputations, and disability.
- Improve access to life-saving health coverage. You are helping workers stay productive, families stay together, and individuals stay on course. In Maryland, under

the leadership of Governor O'Malley and Lt. Governor Brown, we have expanded health coverage to more than 580,000 Marylanders. In fact, despite all sorts of IT challenges, more than 300,000 people have been covered since January 1 under the Affordable Care Act.

- Help the health care system control costs. In Maryland, we are moving away from paying doctors and hospitals based on fee-for-service. Rather, our unique payment system rewards higher quality and better community health. You sign up to help control costs, at least in Maryland, you can spend your days preventing illness and injury.

You are not taking the fun out of life....It's the exact opposite: You are giving people the precious gift of time to live their lives.

Health is a prerequisite for the pursuit of happiness.

And every single victory in public health is a victory over cynicism and indifference.

When I was health commissioner in Baltimore, I led a national effort to have unsafe and ineffective over-the-counter cough and cold medications for young children removed from the market. Cynics claimed that that parents would respond by giving adult medicine to kids, leading to more overdoses. Well, we won, and the scientific literature has documented enormous reductions in calls to poison control centers and visits to Emergency Rooms.

With the leadership of Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley, we dramatically expanded access to drug treatment using an effective medication called buprenorphine. Cynics said it would worsen the substance abuse problem of Baltimore City. Well, we moved forward, and overdoses from heroin declined dramatically.

When I was at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, I was in the middle of efforts to remove from the market Four Loko, which at the time, in one can, had the alcohol of several beers, the caffeine of several diet pepsis, and the sugar of several donuts. The product was linked to car accidents, alcohol poisoning, and worse. Cynics said we were reducing choice for consumers. But we worked with state Attorneys General to educate the public about the risks, and the agency received far more appreciation than concern.

In the State of Maryland, we have focused on reducing preventable causes of infant mortality – starting with unsafe sleep for infants. Babies sleep best alone, on their back, and in a crib – and without a baby bumper pad. Cynics said that parents would not be able to stop using bumper pads. Maryland became the first state to halt their sale. Through a comprehensive approach led by Governor O'Malley and Lt. Governor Brown, we have seen unprecedented declines in infant mortality, including declines associated with unsafe sleep. Hundreds more babies are alive today as a result.

Each of these efforts – and many more – came after months of reviewing evidence and building support. We changed course multiple times, based on public input. Along the way, we were criticized, sometimes personally. There are no short-cuts to good policy ... but there is also no need to give in to cynicism.

Stay enthusiastic. Stay connected to the University of Maryland and to your friends and colleagues. Stay happy.

Keep your sense of humor -- but please, be careful of the inside jokes.

For example, if you are graduating today with a degree in Epidemiology and Biostatistics, and you go on to have twins, do not name one of them Odds Ratio and the other Relative Risk ... and then see if the neighbors can tell the difference.

If you are graduating in Kinesiology, and for the thousandth time someone asks you what kinesiology means ... do not respond that it's the scientific study of k-nees.

I'm sorry about that one. The Dean is never going to forgive me.

If someone tries to stop you from improving health by attacking you with ideology or ignorance, just smile and rise above it.

Draw upon the sense of accomplishment and pride that you have today and keep moving forward.

You have earned a great day today, and we're counting on you for many more accomplishments for health in the future.

Congratulations.