

ADDRESS OF THE

HONOURABLE MINISTER OF HEALTH

DR HETHERWICK NTABA

ON THE OCCASION OF THE

2005 GRADUATION CEREMONY

MALAWI COLLEGE OF HEALTH SCIENCES

LILONGWE, 18TH NOVEMBER 2005

- The Chairperson of the Board of Governors, Malawi College of Health Sciences, Dr Posha Kanthunzi
- The Secretary for Health, Dr Wesley Sangala
- The Executive Director of the Malawi College of Health Sciences, Mr T. G. Masache
- The Country Director, Sight Savers International, Mrs Abigail Suka
- Campus Directors, Staff and Students of the Malawi College of Health Sciences
- Distinguished Guests
- Graduating Students
- Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am honoured and gratified that you have invited me to what is truly a most important day in the life of the Malawi College of Health Sciences and indeed the Ministry of Health, a graduation ceremony. If any of you in this room today have the slightest doubt about this sentiment, I invite you to sit in my chair at Capital Hill just for a day and you will see for yourselves. The human resources crisis continues to be the number one problem facing the health sector, and is seriously impending every single undertaking of the Ministry.

Therefore, I thank the Chairperson of the Board of Governors of the Malawi College of Health Sciences, the Executive Director of the College, Campus Directors and members of staff for your most warm invitation and cordial welcome.

There is a Latin proverb that says 'FINIS CORONAT OPUS'. It is the end that crowns the work. Today, you the graduating students have reached a major milestone in your professional and personal development. You have come to the end of a long and challenging course of study paid for in the hard currency of sacrifice, time, dedication, discipline and your efforts have been crowned with success.

It is only fitting, therefore, that I begin by congratulating and thanking you all. Let me say a special congratulations to the new graduates for having successfully achieved one of their lives' ambitions.

I, like most of you listening to me today, know the price that excellence demands. We have walked on the same road, albeit at different times and faced many of the same obstacles. I am particularly aware that the intellectual and academic demands placed on students by the College are high. I know, first hand, that there is nothing easy about the various courses of study you have all undergone.

As I have just said, what you have achieved, therefore, has been paid for in the hard currency of dedication, discipline and hard work not to mention the cost both to Government and to parents. Is there anyone here today who will disagree with me when I say that perfection or excellence whether personal, institutional or moral, can only be achieved through dedication and hard work? This is why the great Albert Einstein could truthfully say that genius is 90% perspiration and 10% inspiration.

Therefore, ladies and gentlemen, I, personally and in the name of the entire Ministry of Health, proudly acknowledge and salute your achievements. And I will not hide behind fancy diplomatic language. I will speak plainly. The Ministry of Health needs you. So today as you contemplate your future I strongly encourage and urge you to join my Ministry in the enormous, exciting and fulfilling challenge of creating a healthier Malawi, in which our children can grow and flourish.

When I look at the numbers and kinds of cadres graduating here today, 410 in all, I am frankly humbled and overwhelmed. Four hundred and ten professionals all key people, all in short supply, and all sorely needed. The poet once said, there is a sorrow that cannot be expressed by tears alone. Today, I tell you, there is a gratitude and pride that

cannot be expressed by words alone, both on my part, and I am sure by the patients that will greatly benefit from your skills.

I thank the Malawi College of Health Sciences, and I thank each and everyone associated with making today a success. Not only do I **not** take your dedication and efforts for granted, I openly and publicly acknowledge the massive contribution you are making to the nation. My prayer today, and it is truly a prayer, not only as a Minister but equally as a health professional, is that this College continue to flourish and grow. Know that you are contributing in the most meaningful way to the development of this nation. I thank you.

Since occasions like today are both personal and institutional landmarks they almost invite us to reflect as we look back at where we have come from and as we ponder on what the future holds for us.

Abioseh Nicol, a political historian and former Ambassador of Sierra Leone to the United Nations wrote in his Collection of Poems, “Voices from Africa”, that when Africa looks at where it has come from, we stare blindly at the “huddled heaps of four mud walls and thatched falling grass roofs, sometimes enabled by a thick layer of white plaster.” His meaning was very clear, we all too often tend to victimize ourselves. He cries out for an Africa that should no longer be caught in the wake of its constraints but rejoice in the flow of its massive opportunities.

Those graduating today are among the Africans right in the middle of a flow of opportunity. It is an opportunity to step right into the flow of Malawi’s development vision and to say I want in I want to contribute to the flow of opportunity in creating a new life for myself, my family and for the land that gives us life – Malawi.

As we look at our health sector, there can be no shadow of doubt that we are living in a Malawi that is changing rapidly.

With the advent of the multiparty system and a growing democratic environment people have become more and more aggressive in their demands for health services, without a corresponding understanding of the severe resource constraints under which the Ministry operates. And sad to say there are many who have little or no appreciation of the conditions of service under which our professionals are working.

And ironically, it is at this very time when demand is highest that supply, particularly of human resources is at its lowest ebb. And I will be frank and concede that the conditions under which our health professionals are now working are far from ideal. I travel throughout the country and I see the sacrifices being made. But, I believe you will agree with me, sacrifice is what is required to build a nation, to build an environment in which delivery is a joyous and safe event, in which our young can grow and flourish, and in which premature death is the exception rather than the rule.

But I am also realistic. I realize as the poet once said, “too long a sacrifice tends to make a stone of the heart.” Some of our health workers have been losing heart. But I stand here today to tell you help is here.

We have developed in the Ministry a programme that is being hailed as the first of its kind anywhere in the world to address the human resources crisis. When we developed this programme in March 2004 and when people saw the price tag for implementing it over six years, \$278 million or MK33.6 billion, people thought we had moved the Ministry of Health to cloud 9 or some other more exotic place. Yet, only 7 months later in what I might add is probably a world record, DFID had committed \$100 million for the programme. Only last month, we received the most agreeable of surprises when the Global Fund told us that it was also giving another \$100 million. What makes this all the more historical is that Malawi is the first and only country in the entire world to receive Global Fund monies for human resources.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is why in April 2005 we were able to give all health workers a special 52% top up in salaries – the only sector in all of government to do so. We have also received substantive funding to expand the infrastructure of all health teaching institutions in the nation including the Malawi College of Health Sciences. Likewise, we will initiate a nationwide programme of constructing more and better quality houses at the district level for nurses and other staff. And we are looking at a special incentive package to attract and keep professional health workers in very isolated and remote areas. In short, ladies and gentlemen, even if you think that I am painting too rosy a picture, listen to what the director of the Global Fund in Geneva had to say about us. “Malawi may be a flagship for everything that ails Africa, but it may also prove to be a flagship for fixing the problem.” You will agree with me this has got to be the most unique of compliments.

Ladies and gentlemen, I appreciate and understand fully that it is not the financial rewards alone that will perk up the morale of our workers in the Ministry. Appreciation of their services in the form of better educational opportunities, promotions and improved conditions of service and of the work environment will go a long way, and I must add we are addressing each and every one of these.

We have created the Health Service Commission to help us in this regard. I have even encouraged some of our Health Service Commissioners to seriously consider delinking the Health Service from the Civil Service altogether if that will help. So everything is being done I assure you.

Having said this, let me emphasize that the health profession is more than a paying job or service. It is a calling, it is an attitude. You will soon find that the gratitude of the poor that you serve and the inner job satisfaction that you get is more rewarding than the material perks that your employer can afford to pay you.

This calling into which today you have graduated and which you have freely responded to, demands patience and personal sacrifice. Your noble challenge is promotion of Health and through it creation of wealth.

Health is probably the only real universal value left in the world. Without it, we are hampered, hindered and hurt. With it, both individual and national possibilities are unlimited. I do not utter this as a pious sentiment, I say it strong in the knowledge that other small and large nations have trodden the path of underdevelopment and sacrifice and have emerged victorious. What health care services future generations of Malawians will inherit will depend on the vision, the courage and the sacrifices we are willing to make on their behalf today. It was none other than Jesus Himself, who classified His Mission on earth in these most extraordinary words, "I stand among you as one who serves." He had a calling to fulfill and paid a great sacrifice to achieve it.

Even though this talk is probably already a little too long, I cannot close without addressing a most sensitive and delicate issue, namely that of professionalism and ethics in your work. The caregiver-patient relationship is a truly sacred one. Not only must we be scrupulous in observing and upholding this relationship at all times, we must be seen to observe and uphold it. How is it possible that a health professional sworn to uphold a code of medical conduct will not only do it but will abuse it in the most banal and egregious or offensive of manners. This is abhorrent, it is unacceptable and can have no place in our system. Therefore, I am now directing all health professionals in the public sector who have the occasion or need of examining a patient of the opposite sex, to have someone present in the room during such an exam. It is good medical practice and it has necessary given the very unfortunate recent events, which have been splashed across the pages of our national newspapers.

In closing, to the graduating classes, I now say, join me in the service of those Malawians who have placed their hope and their lives in our hands.

What greater act of patriotism can we offer our beloved Malawi than to make it a place where our children, and our children's children can live and grow in health, peace and prosperity.

There are too many who have contributed to today's success to mention individually. But you now know that your efforts have not been in vain. Please accept my gratitude and continue to support the College.

I again want to offer special congratulations to our graduates. The poet said, "A cynic is a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing."

Ladies and gentlemen, particularly our new graduates, please believe me the problems facing our nation have never and will never be resolved by cynics. We need men and women who know the value of the life of a poor and innocent child and are willing to pay any price to maintain it. It is of such courage and dedication that nations are both built and nurtured.

Thank you and May God continue to bless and guide our way.