6-30-00
SUNY Commencement Address

SUNY Stony Brook School of Health Technology and Management
Commencement Address by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton

Stony Brook, New York
June 30, 2000

[Some remarks were cut off at the start of the tape.]

... Dean Lehmann, I am delighted to be here for this graduation. Those of you who are committed to the important work, as the previous speaker, Ms. Chan (sp?), said, to the network of caring and curing, I thought was a wonderful description. I'm also pleased to be here with Assemblyman Steve Englebright (sp?), a very strong supporter of this university, and Vivian Fisher, a member of the Sussex (?) County legislature. But I am particularly pleased to be in a place that has such a well-deserved reputation among faculty, alumni and staff members, and particularly students and those who supported you during your time—your families and your friends--to celebrate the first graduating class of this century. So congratulations...(applause)

There is one graduate who cannot be here today, Tricia Ceber Wagner (sp?), whom I called, who is in the hospital. I was not able to speak with her, she could not speak, but I spoke with her husband Don and I know that for those of you that know her, she entered the occupational therapy program in the summer of 1997 because she wanted to make a difference in people's lives. She has loved working with children, she has five of her own, and looked forward to being in a pediatric setting after graduation. She was diagnosed with breast cancer during the first year of the program, took a leave to be treated, came back to the program very focused on her goals, entered her senior year and successfully completed her first clinical field work assignment. Her cancer, however, returned this spring. I know that in the face of this dreaded disease she has fought every step of the way, and I'm sure that she and her family—her husband and her five children—will be in our prayers and thoughts.

When I was speaking with her husband, he told me what I'd already been informed about their family, which is that he is self-employed, and has really had to work hard to afford the medical bills that Tricia has had to have, and also he asked me to continue to work, as I intend to do, to provide the funding necessary for research into breast cancer, which is of particular importance here on Long Island. Because, I'm sure all of you know, has a higher than national average rate of breast cancer, and other cancers as well. And I don't think any of us should rest until we have done everything possible through funding research, looking into environmental causes and connections, to try to determine what causes this terrible disease, then to take every step necessary to prevent it and cure it.

I am delighted to be again on this campus. I was on this stage, I think, five or six years ago in another capacity, and I have been very impressed by the work that is done here and the achievements, and I applaud President Kenny for what she has done to make

SUNY Stony Brook an incubator for the technology education and health care advances that are driving the economy forward here in this area as well as throughout the state. I also want to thank the (inaudible) for helping to bring this particular school into the information age. I was told, though, that trying to take a tour of the school looking for faculty offices would cause me to wander the hallways for days before actually chancing upon one.

I don't know why this came into my mind, but it is true that many of you here trace your roots to other countries. You are, certainly, first generation, among you first generation Americans, you've been working very hard it these difficult courses that you've undertaken, and a number of you are the first among your families to graduate and earn a degree. And I think that in addition to congratulating the graduates, we ought to ask all the parents and family members, husbands, and wives, and children to be given a round of applause. (applause)

And there are a lot of neat stories in this class. For example, I know that Michelle Gilardi delivered her first baby during the first week of classes, and her second baby right before school started the following year -- and still successfully...(applause)

I've also been told about Fritz St. Fleur, who immigrated from Haiti and earned a degree first in electronics and when he decided to return to school during the day, it meant getting a job as a chauffeur during the night, overcoming language barriers, using his bilingual skills in the clinic to help patients, and hopefully being able to provide occupational therapy to people in his homeland at some point in the future.

To me, these are the real survivors. It doesn't take a television shoe or eating rats to demonstrate what is really important in staying committed to your goal. You are joining a long and distinguished list of alumni who are leading some of the best health care facilities on Long Island, in New York, across our country, and it's been a relatively short period of time--there was a first graduating class of 1972 with only a few students, all in cardio-respiratory sciences. I know that the chair of that first department, William Treanor, is here with us. And you think about all the progress that has been made in such a short period of time. Back in 1972 we were amazed by something called a floppy disk--we never had seen such a thing before. Instead of ER, Chicago Hope, or City of Angels, some of us can remember a show called Marcus Welby, M.D. And when you think back, if you've seen any Nick at Night reruns of that show, you can see Dr. Welby making a good living at his solo practice with his one nurse, apparently seeing about one patient a week. (laughter) Always having time to talk to his patients, his family, his friends, never missing a diagnosis, never leaving home without his black bag.

And although there might be some nostalgia for those days, we know that the truth behind the camera was that the black bag was not often enough to save a patient's life, or prevent a disease, or provide the comprehensive care that you're providing to patients today. If Marcus Welby were transported to Stony Brook, he'd be amazed at the revolution that occurred in health care in such a short period of time. Instead of one doctor and one nurse in an office, he'd see teams of more than forty kinds of health care

providers working together. He'd see state-of-the-art diagnostics and therapies, computer labs, and now the greatest potential instrument of all, the map of the human genome. When that first class graduated, the early methods for sequencing DNA were still a few years off. Today, we know that earlier this week the announcement occurred that the Human Genome, that contains three million letters of our miraculous genetic code, has been found. In it are the poetic and divine instructions to our bodies and our lives, and you will be among the first generation of healthcare professionals to have the tools to beat enemies such as cancer or Parkinson's or Alzheimer's. You will actually be professionals at a time when it is not futile or unrealistic to hope that children at the end of the century will have to look in history books to learn about the diseases that plague us and kill today.

Now whether we use these discoveries to make life better for human beings and not just a privileged few really rests on ensuring that our ethics are as strong as our science. The future of our health care system will be determined, in large measure, by the decisions that we make over the next few years. Dr. Welby kept the records of our health problems in hand-written files sealed away in a big filing cabinet. Today, health care information travels at record speeds among health care professionals, insurance companies, pharmacists and employers. We know that the speed of this information and its ready accessibility can help us streamline costs and provide better care, but it can also invade our fundamental rights to privacy. Think about those people who have the opportunity to find out if they carry the breast cancer gene or some other marker for susceptibility for disease, but who can't be sure that the information wouldn't find its way to a health insurer or employer responsible for providing the health care that we need. What good would the best genetic tests in the world be if people are too worried to use them? I think it is long past time, it is certainly urgent, that we now outlaw genetic discrimination so that our genes and the information derived from them are used to heal us, not deny us jobs or health insurance. And it is time that our medical records have just as much protection as the records of our video store rentals do right now. (applause)

We have to be sure that, with all the advances that are occurring that you're helping to bring about and therapy programs in the lab as physician assistants and all the ways that you're now part of the health care system and that network of caring and curing, that we finance our health care system in a way that is fair, and provide the support that everyone should have at the times of health care crisis.

A few years ago I was on another campus, at Cornell, in Ithaca. It was the summer before last, and I met a young woman who had had a serious car accident, throwing her out of the car, unconscious on the side of the road. Luckily someone came along, called for emergency assistance. They medivaced her out; she went into intensive care; was there for some months, then in rehab for some months. When I met her, she was doing much better, still some signs of the traumatic accident. But what was the real trauma for her is that her insurance company wouldn't pay for the $10,000 medivac helicopter bill because she hadn't called for permission first. And, as she said to me: "You know, Mrs. Clinton, this doesn't make sense at all. I was unconscious on the side

of the road, and I keep telling them that. And their response constantly is: 'We're sorry. We have this pre-approval procedure which you didn't follow.'"

Well those kinds of absurd stories are what is really moving many of us to insure that we have accountability in our health care system, that we put patients, doctors, nurses, health care professionals like all of you back into the driver's seat, and that we take away authority for making the decisions about our health from people sitting in offices hundreds, even thousands, of miles away, second-guessing someone in a lab or a doctor's office. That's why need a Patient's Bill of Rights...(applause)

We also know that all these discoveries won't be translated into better health care if we can't afford the prescription drugs that are out there being developed for our use, and it's probably the most common experience I have when someone tells me that they can't afford--or they have a friend who can't afford--their medication. I was in Syracuse the other day, and this lovely woman—I took her to be at least in her middle eighties—said to me, "I am very concerned about older people. I have all these old friends who can't afford their medication." And we talked, as I often do, about the people who are really torn between affording utility bills, or food, or rent, and the medication they are prescribed.

We now have 2/3 of older Americans without any dependable prescription drug coverage, and I just hope that we're going to be able to make a commitment that, with our extraordinarily good economy, we will at least take care of the prescription drug needs of our people on Medicare. Those of us who have mothers, as I do, or fathers that are on Medicare know that as you get older, you need more health care. And prescription drugs are miraculous, but they're not going to do any good if we can't afford them. That's equally true for all of us who are not on Medicare, because the costs are going up ten to fifteen percent a year. We, as Americans, are paying taxes that create the research that leads to the prescription drug breakthroughs. We pay for the FDA, which tests the drugs to decide if they're safe. And then we pay them the highest costs in the world for the drugs we've already paid to help create and test. And if you'd just look across the border to Canada, you'll see what a difference it makes. Because of my call to Tricia's husband, I've been thinking about breast cancer, and there's a drug called (inaudible) which is used very successfully to treat breast cancer. A three-month supply of that drug to Canada costs $50. Across the border in New York and the rest of our country, it costs at least $290; same drug, same manufacturer, same FDA approval. I would like to see us create a better market for such prescription drugs by allowing the re-importing from Canada of our drugs so we can buy them at the same low cost that Canadians are able to buy them.

Finally, I know that many of you have wonderful career opportunities lying ahead of you. And I hope that you will also find ways to serve those who, too often, are underserved, or unserved. There are many places in New York where people do not have access to quality, affordable health care, where the only place where they know to get health care is the emergency room. And we must do a better job of providing the

resources so that, no matter who you are or where you live, when it comes to your health, you'll have access to the quality professionals that all of you will become.

One of the great discoveries that the Human Genome has already given is that we are all 99.9 percent the same. And if you look around this auditorium, you can see people with every shape and skin color, different eye colors, different heights, different ways of build and other physical characteristics, and yet those are superficial differences that are contained in 1/10 of one percent of our genetic material. Probably one of the greatest challenges we will face is learning how to live together and understand how much in common we certainly have.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, without knowing a thing about the Human Genome Project, "What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us." That is certainly true when it comes to our hearts, our minds, and our souls, and you are now going into probably the most important profession that anyone can be a part of. Helping to keep us healthy, helping to understand more about what causes disease and death, and certainly you carry with you a wonderful education, but you will also be judged by what lies within you, as we all are. How you live, and the example you set, and the way you serve humanity, I wish you all a great and successful career, but even more than that, a happy and meaningful life. Good luck and God speed.

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