

**Convocation Address by Smt. Sonia Gandhiji, Chairperson, National
Advisory Council, GOI at the 39th Convocation at AIIMS on
Wednesday, the 21st December, 2011.**



I am deeply honoured to deliver the 39th Convocation Address of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences.

Thank you for allowing me to share in this moment of joy and celebration for all you young women and men who are receiving degrees today; for your families and friends, and for your teachers.

The All India Institute of Medical Sciences is an institution of which the nation is justly proud. We are proud of this institution because of its achievements in research and education. We are proud of this institution because of its service to the poorest in our country. We are proud of it because it keeps doors open to all sections of our society.

Let me pay tribute to the vision of Jawaharlal Nehru in which this Institute was conceived and developed. In recognition of its crucial importance and the path-breaking role it has played, we are in the process of setting up several similar institutions around the country.

Of course, institutions are only as good as the people who build and run them. The faculty, doctors and staff at AIIMS are second to none, working hard in the service of

society. It is no surprise, therefore, that around 8,000 patients are treated here everyday. It is effectively the one medical institution in the country which best combines excellent medical education with cutting edge research and quality health care.

You, the young women and men who are graduating today, first entered its portals as students eager to learn.

You will leave this event as doctors, vested by society with the great power and knowledge of the science of healing.

Healers have always occupied a very special place in society – not only of the wounded body, but also of wounded hearts, minds and souls.

The power to heal is so awe inspiring that ancient humans considered it divine.

You are joining the great and noble profession of medicine at a unique and important moment in the history of humanity.

On the one hand, exciting advances in medical science are opening up a world of *unimaginable and unimagined* possibilities for us to defeat the age-old scourge of disease.

On the other hand, we continue to witness *unimaginable and unimagined* human suffering due to disease and ill health even when medicines to cure and prevent are at hand. Millions of people around the world die due to *preventable* poverty-related illnesses. Far too many of them are in our country. These needless deaths can be averted largely through simple interventions such as safe drinking water, better sanitation, adequate nutrition and re-hydration packs, apart from the better delivery of vaccines and medicines.

You are greatly privileged to be part of a very small section of our youth who are able to access advanced education in our country. Millions of youth have dreams of becoming doctors or other professionals. You who are graduating today are amongst barely 40,000 who will realize that dream and receive the honour of a medical degree this year.

This privilege comes with an obligation that is best captured in the oath that you take as prescribed by the Medical Council of India to, and I quote, “consecrate your life to the service of humanity” and “to not permit considerations of religion, nationality, race, party politics or social standing to intervene between my duty and my patient”. Unquote.

A nobler pledge, more profound and moving, is hard to find.

Since ancient times, India has had a moral code for its physicians. Traditions from our many faiths emphasize the social and moral responsibility of our physicians.

Young, newly qualified doctors who have consecrated their lives to the service of humanity, do not have to look far to find opportunities to implement this code in India.

Our country still has a long unfinished agenda of reducing maternal and infant mortality as well as preventing communicable diseases both ancient and new. We have also now to contend with rising epidemics of non-communicable diseases, sometimes induced by life-style changes, and remain alert to re-emerging infectious diseases which mutate and sometimes render treatments obsolete.

Sadly and not surprisingly, states and regions with the highest levels of poverty and malnutrition among children and adult women, are also those with the highest disease burden.

I do not, of course, mean to imply that we have not progressed. Indeed, life expectancy in India has more than doubled in the last sixty years. Key indicators such as infant and maternal mortality rates too have shown a steady decline. Smallpox, the scourge of centuries, has been eliminated. Leprosy and Polio are now contained and Malaria and other vector borne diseases are being tackled with greater confidence. Yet, we must acknowledge that we need to do much more especially in rural and remote areas.

India has an acute shortage of health professionals. Almost 60 per cent of health workers reside in urban areas; the majority are employed in the private sector. Emigration of doctors hurts us.

It is the work of self-less medical professionals in the most inhospitable conditions – that has brought about significant progress in the health of our country over the last six decades. We need to emulate their spirit and example.

Dear students, today is a moment of transition, a moment in which a new mantle of responsibility is placed by this nation on your shoulders.

Now, it is your turn to translate your oath into reality.

Your generation of young doctors will have to use and apply new, powerful and exciting medical technologies in socially responsible ways to bring new cures to those who need them the most.

Your generation of doctors will have to find new ways to balance your legitimate desire for financial security and well being with the need to ensure that, in a country where inequality and poverty persist, no one is denied your healing touch irrespective of their background.

May the blessings of your teachers and parents, and of this entire nation, be with you, protecting you and safeguarding you, as you set out into the world in your noble task to heal people and bring solace and happiness to millions of your fellow human beings. I congratulate you all and wish you well in the future.

Smt. Sonia Gandhi
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