

Greetings to parents, family and friends of the Class of 2006 and to our new Doctors of Veterinary Medicine!

Let me begin by telling the parents that it has truly been an honor and a privilege to work with your sons and daughters. I e-mailed the class last Tuesday and told them that I have probably learned as much from them as they have learned from me and I meant it! I would also like to take this opportunity to again thank the class for the Norden Teaching Award. It means a lot to me to have been recognized by this class. I am not sure I am deserving of this award and on Tuesday following the Honor Day Banquet I kept waiting for someone to come by my office and tell me there had been a mistake. You see, that actually happened to me once. A few years ago, the students for some unknown reason nominated me for the National student AVMA teaching award; I was announced winner at the national meeting. A couple of days later the students had a TGIF Happy Hour to award me the plaque. The following Monday a SCAVMA officer from NC State called to tell me that I had to give the award back because there had been an error in the vote counting. I got a chuckle out of the episode.

Right now I know that those who are hearing me speak for the first time are thinking “he’s not from NY with THAT accent.” You are right and so you don’t have to guess any longer, it is pure SW Virginia / North Carolina hillbilly moonshiner accent, similar to Richard Petty and a little worse today since I just returned from there.

I would like to begin my charge to the Class of 2006 today with some general comments as we reflect on our profession and your graduation.

Graduates in the Class of 2006: you are today entering into the veterinary profession at a very exciting time. Scientific advancements in the profession are occurring at NASCAR speed; both specialization and emergency / critical care clinics are the norm and pet owners are requesting and expecting better care for their animals than ever before. Veterinary Medicine and the importance of animals in our society are headline news – more people may know about Barbaro’s fracture than any human athletic injury and the #1 book on the NY Times bestseller list is about a Labrador retriever Marley and his human family.

Great progress has been made in permitting a healthier balance between work and leisure hours – you can now be a successful veterinarian and have a life outside of practice. Well... except for interns and residents – you may have to wait a bit for this. Even your leisure time, though, is likely to be influenced by veterinary medicine. If history repeats itself many of your closest friends that you will socialize with for the next several decades will be intern or resident mates, associates in your practice, and, of course, some of your classmates. Some of you may even marry veterinarians – believe me, I know – it happened to me and I am thankful for that. As a matter of fact, I would not be here in front of you today if it were not for my wife, Dr. Nita Irby, who has pushed and guided me through the world of digital imaging and PowerPoint; otherwise I would still be projecting 2 x 2 Kodachrome slides. My kids refer to me as electronically challenged.

I still remember my first days as a practicing veterinarian and you, like me, will probably be wondering, “Do I know what I should do at this point?” Well, time will tell, but let me give you some assurances by reminding you that you are very special. You were selected from a highly competitive pool of applicants, you have had the opportunity to be exposed to case material from the first week of your freshman year, you have likely had more hands-on, quality laboratories than any class ever / anywhere AND you are the last class to be taught by Sandy DeLahunta, possibly *the greatest* veterinary educator ever. You have been taught to be problem solvers and to think outside the box. You should be very well prepared!

I would now like to make some specific comments that are based on my 30 years of practicing veterinary medicine and I believe whole-heartedly in their importance to success in veterinary medicine. They are what I like to call the “5 C’s to Success”:

C #1 - COMPLETENESS

As in performing a complete history and physical examination. In this age of modern medicine and science this art is often lost, Always listen to the owners, they have something very important to say. Complete your examinations just like Dr. Hornbuckle and others taught you. I especially remember one of my former students, Dr. John Lackey in NC who told me on a visit back to the College after his first year in mixed animal practice “Divers, most of the diagnoses I missed my first year in practice were not because I didn’t learn about them in school but because I forgot to look for them.”

C #2 - COMPASSION

I believe the most successful veterinarians are not necessarily the brightest but instead are the ones that consistently demonstrate compassion for the sick animal and its owner. I learned a lot about this by working for 10 years with Dr. Jill Beech at the University of Pennsylvania, along with Dr. Krista Selzer who was an intern here at Cornell some years ago. They are the most compassionate large animal veterinarians I have known. Compassion contains the word passion which is another important attribute of a successful veterinary career. Your ability to maintain a passion for whatever you do in veterinary medicine will be a key to your success and happiness. Always remember why you chose to go to veterinary school.

C #3 - COMMUNICATION

This is a necessity of life, not only for a successful practice, but can provide a better night’s sleep than “LUNESTA”. Good communications can prevent many potential adversarial situations. Some of the very best communication skills I have observed in clinical practice belonged to a LA surgery resident here at Cornell several years ago. He is now, not surprisingly, an outstanding equine surgeon at a practice in Connecticut. During his residency training he had some really difficult, and on a few occasions, catastrophic, cases. I noticed that he would get thank you cards, flowers, fruit baskets, etc. even when the outcome of the case was not a good one. Under the same circumstances I would likely get a letter on fancy stationery headed with a group of individuals and followed by the words “Attorney at Law.” Owners responded to Dr. Edwards in this way because of his communication skills. His communications were always prompt, honest, sincere, complete, never rushed such that the owners felt as though they were an equal part of the team.

Speaking of difficult cases, let me stray from the “C’s” for just a moment. You will have many days that are exhilarating, where everything goes well, but you will also have a few days where everything is just plain horrible. That is the way with the medical profession where sometimes the difference between life and death can be a single difficult decision. My advice that I hope you will remember is on the really bad days, don’t let yourself get too “low” and on the really great days try not to get too “high.” If my kids heard me telling you this they would kill me for being so corny and embarrassing.

C #4 - CURRENT

Stay current. Be a life-long learner. This will require conscious effort on your part since new disorders, new technology and new treatments seem to be discovered each day. I certainly regret not taking the time to become more proficient at the art of ultrasound when it was first introduced to the profession in the early ‘80s. I would also encourage you to share your experiences in clinical, evidence-based publications. Historically this information has come almost totally from universities but that is changing.. With the large number of high-quality SA, equine, production and exotics private practices, many of the scientific publications in the future will come from these practices.

C #5 - COMMUNITY

You are now a member of a well-respected and trusted profession. As such, you will frequently be asked to volunteer in your community. If you choose to do so, your reward will be great! In April of last year I attended my 30 - year reunion at the University of Georgia. At the conference there were 13 members of the Class of 1955 who were recognized with 50 year gold medallions. As each person was called to the stage, a litany of accomplishments was read. All had been successful veterinarians, 11 in practice, 1 in research at the University of Birmingham Medical School and 1 in public health. What was most impressive was their list of

accomplishments outside the veterinary arena. They had been mayors, served in the National Guard, started city-wide recreational programs, started food banks and numerous other Jimmy Carter – like deeds.

Community also means doing your part for you personal community – your family. I hope this weekend you will each take some time to tell your family and friends how much you appreciate their support and help. Also, when you really get busy with the rest of your life the next week or month, remember what one of my hero's, Paul “Bear” Bryant, always told his Alabama Crimson Tide football team at the start of fall practice – “take time to call your family.”

In closing, I think I can speak for the entire faculty and the Cornell veterinary community in saying “thank – you for being such a wonderful class; your enthusiasm for learning and caring for our patients have truly made our job a pleasant one. Best wishes to you in your future endeavors and don't forget your journey at Cornell as a member of the Class of 2006.