

Chief Guest remarks by Professor Francis Omaswa
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President Firoz Rasul, Ambassador Amin Mawji,
Members of the Board of Trustees of the Aga Khan
University,
Members of Government and the Diplomatic Corps,
Faculty and staff of the University,
Distinguished guests,
And, above all, the graduating students today,



Good morning. It is a great pleasure to be here with you today to celebrate the graduation of the Class of 2019.

I am well aware of the outstanding reputation of the Aga Khan University here in Uganda, of its hospital in Nairobi and around the world. We look forward to the establishment of a new Aga Khan University Hospital in Kampala, and we see it is a most welcome development. It will surely help to raise the standard of care, to educate health care leaders, and to generate knowledge that is needed to address some of Uganda's critical health challenges. And it will add to the choices of the people of Uganda in seeking healthcare.

My main remarks today are addressed to you happy graduands of today. I address you as you commence your respective journeys in the health profession here in Uganda, in Africa and globally. Imagine, where do you want to be twenty or thirty years from today? I am sure you have been thinking about the answer to this question. What I will do now is to share with you some thoughts from my own fifty years of walking this route.

I graduated as a medical doctor in 1969 – it is just over fifty years. So, medicine is just not my profession, it is also my passion. And what I am going to say today is not about praising myself but it is more about being able to inspire you graduands of today to perform even better than myself. Here are some suggestions for your consideration.

First and foremost, I encourage you to take good care of yourselves through personal self-discipline. Do not take for granted simple things like being clean, eating well, dressing smart, keeping good company. Keep company with those who will advance your career. Join professional associations and be active in them. That is where you will meet those who will not pull you down but lift you up.

Second, I would like to call upon you to pursue excellence in whatever you do. Everything you do must be done to the highest achievable standards taking into account your personal capability. This, therefore, includes big and small things, which you handle in life. Do keep in mind that

what you are doing well today, you can even do better tomorrow. This is known as continuous quality improvement in the sphere of quality management. In this way, you will grow professionally and socially.

Third, you need to cultivate people skills – how to get around in a very complex world. When I was a schoolboy, I was introduced a book '*How to Win Friends and Influence People*'. I found this book very useful and like to recommend it to young people. In your life, you are going to meet all types of people – those who are nice and friendly, and those who are nasty and aggressive. You will meet generous people, you will meet greedy and mean people, but you will have to manoeuvre your pursuit of excellence among all these characters and make sure that you succeed in the midst of all these challenges.

What I have personally found is that if you are positive, and you are helpful to all people, if you can help someone, why not do it? I have also found it helpful to work for the common good and not my own personal good. Once it is known that you are working for all the people, including yourself, you find that you are given more and more things to do on behalf of your community from which you will also benefit. And, this is the surest way to become a leader.

You must also be prepared and learn how to fight battles with people in your life because there will always be disagreement. If you are positive and working for the common good, your point of view will have strength, you will argue calmly with composure for the common good and most of the time, win the day.

Do not keep grudges and sulk, because it is you who will suffer from stress, blood pressure and not the one from whom you are keeping a grudge. If you do not keep grudges, and you work for the common good, even those who once did not agree with you will come back to you and work with you for the common good – that is how you consolidate your leadership and can confirm to you as my personal experience over decades.

Fourth, it is essential to cultivate a culture of integrity. This means doing the right thing, the right way, all the time. Whether people are watching you or nobody is watching you. You will be able to achieve this with the three characteristics in place, and those become your routine.

My friends, I must also warn you that even if you comply with these principles, things will still go wrong. You will make mistakes; there will be mistakes in your work, either caused by you directly or by those who work with you. Please do not allow such mistakes to cause you to lose your long-term vision. Acknowledge these mistakes, own those mistakes and learn from them. Even if the mistake is made by another person in your team, please take personal responsibility and ask yourself 'What do I need to do next so that it does not happen again?' This may mean a call for you to support the colleague who was responsible for the mistake so that in your team, it does not happen again. If you are a leader, you are responsible for everything, including the errors of those whom you lead. It is your job to make sure that the people you lead do not make those mistakes.

A few weeks ago, I gave a talk to the Rotary Club of Kampala with the title '*The World is Watching*'. The key message is that while we live our lives in public and private, what we do is being watched and being judged by all manner of people. It is this opinion that determines your destiny.

When you live your life pursuing those four pillars, there is every possibility that you will be judged positively. And good things will happen to you without you asking for them. And here are a few personal examples from my life.

Most of the positions I have held were by invitation. I completed my training as a cardiothoracic surgeon in the United Kingdom, and was permanently settled there with my family until the Government of Kenya sent a senior surgeon to my house to ask me to lead the open-heart surgical programme in Nairobi.

From Nairobi, there were still many problems in Kampala – there was a war in Uganda. I could have gone back to the UK as my permanent residency was still valid. However, together with the Association of Surgeons of East Africa, I went with my family to a small mission hospital to test how to provide quality services particularly in surgery to the rural poor. That is what I call working for the common good.

Later, when President Yoweri Museveni took over power, we were ordered to go to Kampala despite our desire to stay in the small mission hospital. My wife took charge of the anesthesia department at Mulago Hospital, and I joined Makerere University as the founding director of the Uganda Heart Institute. I got a number of appointments but the message is, if you work for the common good, you pursue excellence, all these things will be yours as they became mine. Remember, the world is watching.

Finally, most of you are nurses and midwives. I want to particularly congratulate you all because the year 2020 has been declared by the World Health Assembly as the Year of the Nurse and Midwife. Your graduation this year makes it very special.

I am a member of the global Nursing Now campaign board, and the message from this campaign, is that nurses and midwives need to get to the front, be more visible in service delivery and in leadership as part of the movement to achieve Sustainable Development Goals and Universal Health Coverage.

I am personally convinced that if this happens, with nurses and midwives leading integrated, people-centered primary healthcare here in Uganda, we will actually achieve UHC that leaves no one behind soonest, and with the currently available resources.

I have written a piece on this topic in the current issue of the Africa Health Journal on how nurses can achieve UHC through integrated primary healthcare, working with village health teams in Uganda. This people-centered primary health care is also part of a slogan commonly

used when I was Director General of Health Services “Health is made at home and only repaired in health facilities when it breaks down.”

Graduands, I urge you to be uncompromising in your efforts to deliver the highest-quality care. To empower people to stand up for their right to good care. And to spread the message that health is made at home. If we do this, there will be another slogan, which will become a reality in Uganda: “This is Uganda. What do you expect? Only the best.”

Congratulations graduands and your families! I hope and pray that most of you will embrace some of these suggestions and in future, you will become global leaders.

Thank you.

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