

## **Dean Donald S. Burke's Convocation Address** **University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health** **28 April 2019**

### Introduction

Thank you Professor Roberts for your kind remarks. I wish my parents were alive to hear that introduction. Mom & dad would be proud, and they probably would have even believed it! Here today with us are my wife Jane, our daughter Jessie and her husband Shawn, and our granddaughter Griffin and grandson Warren. Our other daughter Cassie is in Boston. I thank my family for their love and support. They know that I'm actually an absent-minded professor who wanders around the house in his bathrobe, obsessing over this-or-that rare book on the history of public health.

To the members of the Graduating Class of 2019, I offer you my wholehearted congratulations. Our ceremony today provides an opportunity to pause, and reflect, on life's transitions. This is a joyous event, marking the successful completion of your student days, and the commencement of your professional careers. All of us here, your families, partners, friends, and graduate school faculty, join in celebrating your achievements, and wishing you continued future success. I say this as a wizened academic, about to step down as dean, who knows a thing or two about professional transitions. I spent my first quarter century in education and training, my second quarter century in service to my country, my third quarter century in academia, and am now planning for my fourth quarter century. Notice that I don't refer to this as my last quarter century. It's been an exciting ride so far; who knows what the future holds? And lucky you, you are just beginning yours!

### The Meaning of Health

During your education here at the Graduate School of Public Health, you have developed knowledge and skills in the art and science of health. But what is meant by "health?" The English word "health" shares its etymological roots with other words, many of which convey more spiritual concepts, words like hale, and whole, and holy. All of these words are cognates, with common linguistic origins. Similarly, the words for "health" in other languages that I know, like "santé" in French, or "sukaphap" in Thai, are also cognates with words that convey non-physical aspects of well-being. The French "santé" shares a common Latin root with the modern English word "sanity." In Thailand, the word Sukaphap, for health, derives from the Sanskrit word "suk" which means "happiness."

I start with word meanings because the question "what is health" is a fundamental issue for us in the health professions. Today in the United States most of our medical system focuses heavily on the treatment of disease. I deplore the widely used term "health care", because it jams the word "health" into care of the sick. But this is only one dimension of health. The World Health Organization, also known as the WHO, defines Health as "A state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." Some critics of this WHO definition have

assailed it as being too aspirational and unattainable. Critics aside, this definition has taken hold worldwide and serves as the foundation for the work that we do at Pitt Public Health. I much prefer this conceptualization of health, as “complete physical, mental, and social well-being” of the whole person.

Pittsburgh has a remarkable connection to this definition of health, as it was originally put forward in the preamble of the Constitution of the WHO in 1946. Our first Dean had chaired the Technical Preparatory Committee that drafted that Constitution. And the Chinese delegate who chaired the sub-committee on the preamble, named Szeming Sze, moved to Pittsburgh to spend his elder years with his daughter. His family graciously donated his valuable personal papers on the founding of the WHO to our University archives. I have tracked down most of the historical documents leading up to the WHO definition of health, to better understand the intellectual and political origins of such a very modern, very socially aware conceptualization of health. One of our first acts in our newly renovated School of Public Health building was to inscribe this WHO definition of health in bold lettering on the wall facing the entrance of the Dean’s office, for all to see.

### Precepts for the Public Health Workplace

All right, if our goal is to promote health, how should we go about it?

Over the years, I have collected a set of rules for behavior in the public health workplace; they help me personally decide how to behave in certain circumstances. When encountering a difficult situation, I have found it helpful to default to these simple rules to help me make decisions. By sharing them today, I hope they can help you too.

My modeling collaborator and friend Josh Epstein once wrote an article entitled “Learning to be Thoughtless” in which he pointed out that we all have countless internalized norms that we don’t even think about; decisions that we don’t agonize over. For example, when I got up this morning, I didn’t stop to think if I would put on clothes today or not. Or when I pulled out of my driveway I didn’t stop to think whether I would drive on the left side or the right side of the road today. The default mode isn’t always the optimum, but it usually is, and this way of thinking - or this way of not thinking – of being thoughtless – makes life a whole lot easier.

Of course, there is no single probability, no single threshold, for optimizing your routine behaviors. But if the desired outcome can be achieved at least 90% of the time, that makes for pretty good odds. So let’s go with what works 90% of the time.

Precepts are rules for behavior, for norms that we share and internalize. Here is my set of “Precepts for the Public Health Workplace”, expressed as “90 per cent rules”.

**90 % Rule, # 1.** “90% of success is showing up.” I have enjoyed all my jobs, but there have inevitably been some days, and some responsibilities, when I’m less enthusiastic, and this rule comes into play. Of course you have to show up. But showing up means more than just physically coming to class or to work, it means engaging and exploring. By physically getting out of my routine, I’ve met amazing people who became dear friends, like Dr. Ananda Nisalak in Thailand who taught me about dengue

hemorrhagic fever, or Dr. Mpoudi Ngole in Cameroon, with whom I ventured into the Congo jungle, on our studies of emerging viruses in chimpanzees and gorillas. It's amazing what can happen if you show up and expand your opportunities.

**90 % Rule, # 2.** "Give 90% of the credit to your co-workers and collaborators." This is a variant of the aphorism "There's no limit to what you can accomplish, if you don't care who gets the credit." This is probably one of the most valuable workplace rules, but one of the toughest to internalize. Most of you are familiar with the names of famous health science heroes, like Pasteur, or Salk, or Watson and Crick. As you know, Pasteur is credited with the first laboratory development of vaccines, Salk with the conquest of polio, and Watson and Crick with discovering the helical structure of DNA. But how many know the names Joseph-Alexander Auzias Turrene, or Basil O'Connor, or Rosalind Franklin? These behind-the-scenes men and women are also true heroes. Without them, the house-hold name scientists could not have succeeded. I deeply admire these latter three. Sharing credit isn't always easy, but it gets things done. The higher you are in the organization, the more you should share credit.

**90 % Rule, # 3.** "90% of meaning can be conveyed in half the words." To this day I still remember how crestfallen I felt, over 40 years ago, when my labor of love manuscript on diagnosis of Japanese encephalitis was returned to me by my friend and mentor Neurology Professor Dick Johnson. He had chopped and slashed it mercilessly with red ink. He cut it in half, and he was right. I had tried to force too many extraneous details into the paper, to its detriment. This 90% rule also applies in spoken communications. Sometimes when I'm at a meeting and my mind starts to wander, I amuse myself by sketching the meeting dynamics, who speaks the longest, who butts in over other speakers, who repeats themselves. What I've observed is that the most valuable contributors are timely and to the point. Most people try to over-discuss. I encourage you to be succinct.

**90 % Rule, # 4.** "90% of perceived insults can be attributed to accidents or indifference" This is one I made up myself, and use all the time. Almost all my colleagues have heard it from me. What it means of course is that when you feel insulted by someone, 90% of the time that person doesn't even realize you feel that way. It's likely not personal and not intentional, so try not to make it so. This rule not only benefits you, in that you don't let negative feelings fester, it also has calming effects on the entire organization when everyone applies the rule. Unfortunately, you may encounter some persons who are repeat offenders. In this case, Bayesian statistics do apply: the posterior probabilities change with each occurrence. But the 90% rule should always be your starting default.

**90 % Rule, # 5.** "90% of everything is junk" This is known as Sturgeon's Law, named after the 1950's science fiction writer Theodore Sturgeon. The actual quote is a bit more scatological than the version I am using in today's dignified setting. Sturgeon had grown weary of critics continually lampooning science fiction. In response to a taunt that "90% of science fiction is junk" he shot back that "90% of everything is junk." This may be a bit harsh, but let me explain. Innovation in every field, including public health, is rare and doing work that is truly outstanding takes creativity and determination. In choosing collaborators, I have always tried to identify and engage the very best people in the world to work with as partners. And I have aimed to accept nothing less than outstanding work from my students and colleagues. Strive for excellence.

**90 % Rule, # 6.** “90% of the work is done in the first 90% of the time, and the last 10% of the work is done in the last 90% of the time.” This is actually known as the 90-90 rule. It was first derived for work on software development, but I have found it to be true in most of the public health projects I have worked on. Be realistic about setting goals and timelines.

So, to recap, here are my “Precepts for the Public Health Workplace,”

- Show up, “90% of success is showing up.”
- Share credit, “Give 90% of the credit to your co-workers and collaborators.”
- Be concise, “90% of meaning can be conveyed in half the words.”
- Chill out, “90% of perceived insults can be attributed to accidents or indifference”
- Value excellence, “90% of everything is junk.”
- Be realistic, “90% of the work is done in the first 90% of the time, and the last 10% of the work is done in the last 90% of the time.”

I promise you that if you go with these 90% probabilities 100% of the time, you will be a better public health professional for it. And I would venture to say, a happier, less stressed-out person.

### The World Is Looking to You for the Answers

Let me turn now from offering advice, to present you with a challenge.

During the early days of the AIDS epidemic, Wimbledon tennis champion Arthur Ashe contracted the virus from a blood transfusion during surgery. In a convocation speech just like this one, in 1992, the year before he died, he challenged young health graduates. He said, “Like it or not, the world is looking to you for the answers.” I began working on AIDS early in epidemic and kept that quote posted above my desk for years. Somehow his words affected me deeply, and I worked hard, doing everything I could to prevent and control the spreading epidemic of HIV and AIDS. It became more than a job. It became a mission, even a calling. I felt that, because of my training and expertise, I personally carried a measure of responsibility to come up with the answers. Like it or not.

So now I am passing this challenge along to you. Your generation will have the opportunity to control the opioid epidemic, to end gun violence, to improve birth outcomes, to prevent cancer, to reduce health disparities, to provide care for mental illness, and to promote healthy aging, to name just a few of the ongoing challenges in public health. The world will be looking to you for the answers. I know you can do it. You have shown that you have incredible potential. You have the potential to improve health, in all its dimensions – the physical, and the mental and the social. You have the potential to be transformational leaders in the public health work place, and in society at large. And yes, you have the potential to change the world, for the better. We at Pitt Public Health have done our best to prepare you for these challenges. I am confident that you will make the most of it.

Thank you for your attention. Now let me conclude with my most important message:

Class of 2019. Congratulations as you commence your careers in public health!

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