

On Women's Health and Rights
Lectures, Speeches and Statements
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Looking beyond our myopic vision
Acceptance speech
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It is with appreciation and with humility that I accept this honorary degree from the University of Toronto, a University I always admired in a country I always loved.

It is a pleasure to be in the same convocation with Professor Drinkwater. We both come from the field of women's health, and I take it that the University of Toronto, in honoring both of us, is signaling the importance of women's health, for which societal and international action has long been overdue. The University already deserves credit for founding the Centre for Research in Women's Health, which has made significant contributions in this field particularly in bridging biomedical and social perspectives. The fascinating work of Professor Drinkwater focused on women's exercise of their beautiful bodies. My own concern has been women's exercise of their human rights, including the first right of all: women's right to life, a right that is still not fulfilled, with one woman dying every minute or two somewhere in the world, because of pregnancy and childbirth.

I extend sincere congratulations to all the young graduates and I wish them a successful professional career. I have my own professional career largely behind me. But one good thing that age does is that it corrects our myopic vision, our short sightedness. I can now see that in our noble profession, we are at risk of a narrow myopic vision. I want in the next few minutes to share with you three examples of this myopic vision which may limit the potential of our profession.

The first example of a myopic vision is when we do not see the people behind the biology. The exciting developments in biological sciences are giving us a much better understanding of the cellular and molecular mechanisms in health and disease, and are opening completely new frontiers in medicine. But, in our excitement, we are liable to forget that these chemical molecules and these cells are parts of a whole human being. Hippocrates taught that anyone who wishes to practice medicine has to study the town or city in which he will practice, and the people on whom he will practice, before starting to practice. We cannot bury our heads in the sands of biology, and lose sight of the social realities of people's lives. Biology should not make us forget the social roots of medicine.

Another myopic vision is when we do not see other scientific disciplines and professions, beyond our own. The fact is that improvements in health are not an exclusive domain of health care. Advances in agriculture and veterinary science, better nutrition and improved

environmental sanitation are just some examples of significant contributions to health made in other fields. But there are others too. One example is your Faculty of Law which is making a significant contribution to the health of women, through its internationally renowned work on women's human rights, including sexual and reproductive rights. We, health professionals, should learn to work with colleagues in other fields to advance people's health.

My third and last example of a myopic vision is when we do not see the world outside our countries. We belong to the privileged first generation of humankind that saw our earth from outer space, and saw it for what it is: a small fragile spaceship journeying into the unknown. All of us on board are interdependent. We share a common future. We share a common heritage. The deciphering of the book of life, the human genome, among other things, has confirmed what has already been obvious in your great multi-racial community. Genetic differences between races are much less than genetic differences within the same race. Globalization can have its bright side. You, Canadians, have been privileged with rooms at the top in our world, rooms with a view, where you can see the good and bad in our world. I am proud and you should be proud of our Canadian colleagues who are actively participating in the safe motherhood initiative of the International Federation of Gynaecology and Obstetrics. These young doctors, women and men, from Canada, are working with counterpart obstetricians and midwives in Uganda, in Yemen and in Central America to save the lives and health of women. Let me conclude with a quote from the report of the Commission on Health Research for Development chaired by Dr John Evans: "Our world has become a global health village, generating an urgent need for mutual learning and joint action."

Thank you.