

**SPEECH BY DR OON CHIEW SENG,
AT THE SPECIAL CONFERMENT CEREMONY
FOR THE HONORARY DOCTOR OF LETTERS
HELD ON TUESDAY, 12 JANUARY 2021, 11.00 AM AT NUS**

Madam Halimah Yacob President of the Republic of Singapore and NUS Chancellor

NUS Pro-Chancellors

Chairman of NUS Board of Trustees, Mr Hsieh Fu Hua

NUS President, Professor Tan Eng Chye

The great class of 2020

Ladies and gentlemen

1. I am delighted to receive this distinction in recognition of my life's work and of my contribution to society and nation building for the last 75 years. When I proudly informed my friends and relatives about the award, they remarked, "Well, better late than never!"
2. We are in the midst of challenging times and great uncertainty in the coming months and years. But I can assure you, we will overcome, at the personal as well as at the national level. To quote Benjamin Disraeli, "There is no education like adversity". To the great class of 2020, you have been given a singular opportunity to put your knowledge and skills to work in the service of the global community which is facing the biggest crisis of your generation. It is the best time to graduate.

Adversity and opportunity

3. Many generations ago, I too matriculated at a time of great uncertainty. Like you, my education was disrupted, not by pandemic but by war. Let me share some aspects of my story to hopefully encourage you to persevere in your journey through grit, resilience, integrity and purpose. The mnemonic spells 'GRIP'. Whenever you are in a panic mode, remember to get a GRIP of yourself.
4. 80 years, easily a lifetime ago, I was accepted into King Edward VII Medical College. Six months into my programme, Singapore was bombed on Dec 8th, 1941, which heralded the start of World War 2 in Singapore. In February 1942, the female members and children of the Oon family clan were evacuated by ship bound for Australia. However, due to heavy bombardments, the vessel was forced to change course several times and I eventually made it to Bombay (now Mumbai). My family in Singapore, had heard on the radio that the ship had sunk, resulting in great distress and anguish. In Bombay, four families with their 16 children shared one flat. I was assigned the store room with another family member. Rain and moisture constantly leaked through the roof and walls but luckily, even now, I do not suffer from rheumatism. On the ship and in Bombay, I did not let up on my study. The extremely difficult circumstances did not deter me. I also volunteered at the local hospital, continued self-learning, and took even more exams. I was accepted by the Lady Harding Medical College for Women in New Delhi in 1943. There I began my three-year attendance requiring an arduous and lonely three-day train ride to New Delhi, and one annual journey home to Bombay to see my family. The end of the war came with a new beginning and a silver lining with my return to Singapore in 1946. I had now progressed ahead three years, my exams taken in India were recognised, and the

Principal (Dean) of King Edward College said all I needed was to do the postings, and to help him set up the ladies' hostel, in those days it was called Holnechase at Grange Road. You see I was already learning multitasking. So dear graduates, there is opportunity even in the darkest times; setbacks are part of life, and if you seize the opportunity it will make you stronger.

Career resilience, dexterity, and clarity of purpose

5. I started my career in nursing at the age of 21. I was working at the Penang General Hospital. It was tough but fulfilling work. I worked overtime during a typhoid epidemic. I wanted to do more which meant that I had to acquire more knowledge and skills. With my family's encouragement, I decided to give medicine a try but I did not want to quit my nursing job as the path ahead was still unclear. Remember, this was 1937. In many families at that time, girls were not encouraged to pursue higher studies and gender discrimination was rampant. The first obstacle was to seek approval from the matron and Chief Medical Officer, which had never been previously granted, and the second obstacle was to pass the Senior Cambridge exams which included Latin. Fortunately, following their approval, I took six months no-pay leave to prepare for the exams and passed.
6. Upon graduation from King Edward College in 1948, I was posted to various government hospitals and proceeded to complete my specialist MRCOG in 1955 on a Queens Fellowship, I worked at KK Hospital at the peak of the population boom. I am proud to have brought many baby boomers into the world. I began to realise that women were more comfortable seeing female O&G specialists, and there was an underserved socially disadvantaged community who preferred the privacy of a private sector evaluation. So I decided to leave the safety net of the public sector and opened a small clinic at Armenian Street. It was a risky transition in deeply uncertain times. Being the first private sector O&G specialist, there was no support from other specialists, no private hospital to admit deliveries and I had to set up my own antenatal facilities. My anaesthetist back-up came from a British army doctor who had to promptly return to camp after each delivery. It was a harrowing time as I had to manage any complications arising alone. From a solo practice for many years, I later formed an O&G partnership at the new Mount Elizabeth Hospital in 1978.
7. I retired from Obstetrics and Gynaecology in 1991, at the ripe young age of 75. I yearned to travel while I still had the energy. I did not travel much while running my practice. However, travel and mahjong could not fill all my time! Since I had already been volunteering at the Sree Narayana Mission Home for the Aged Sick for several years, I noticed again an underserved community. People with dementia in Singapore were admitted to mental hospitals. Not only were they stigmatised but they were not getting the best care and treatment. After that, I travelled to visit dementia homes and centres in Australia and other countries. I attended many courses and conferences to equip myself with new knowledge and skills. You see, I embraced lifelong learning before it became popular or necessary. With the help of building professionals, I worked on developing the first Alzheimer home in Singapore, Apex Harmony Lodge at Pasir Ris, which was completed in 1999. I was its Founding Chairman until 2012.

Social capital

8. I am grateful for the support of my siblings, mentors and friends throughout my journey. In particular, friendships forged during university days are lifelong and durable. We looked out for one another, it was probably a less competitive environment in my time. It has

given form to my philosophy of treating all my patients, paying and non-paying, with the same standard of care irrespective of social background. My gratification was bringing about successful pregnancies and witnessing the happiness of growing families. It gives me tremendous satisfaction to see the little bundles of joy grow up to be healthy, successful and some becoming prominent adults. Strangers have approached me to thank me for my service. Some became close friends and helped me raise funds for charitable causes and dementia care. Others joined me in my favourite brain exercise - it's called mahjong therapy. In the earlier years, they would introduce their children and these days, the wonderful beings whom I delivered, are the ones who come up to me. Recently, I patronised a restaurant for the first time. The middle-aged restaurant owner overheard my name and gave me a free 'makan' for having delivered her. Her mother must have told her.

9. Dear Graduates, stay true to your intrinsic motivation, serve honourably, and contribute positively to your community. Do your work well and the rewards will come, sooner or later. Rewards and recognition are not goals that we should seek or expect.
10. Congratulations to the Great Class of 2020. Stay safe and seek to be Greater.