

**SPEECH BY DR ANNA MOKGOKONG AT THE 2016 GRADUATION
EVENT – Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University (SMU):
Friday, 13 May 2016**

Thank you Programme Director.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the Interim Vice Chancellor, Professor Chris de Beer, members of the Executive Committee of the University, professors, lecturers and all members of staff, students and, most importantly, our graduands.

I am both honored and humbled to have been asked to address you today at this momentous occasion. Today is particularly special to me, personally, because I'm being honored by an institution that has a reputation for producing some of the best medical professionals in the country over many decades. Indeed.... I am very proud to say that I am one of them. Thirty years ago there used to be tough housekeeping rules: "No alcohol on campus, no girls in the men's hostels, gates closed at ten pm!" I have fond memories of that special day 37 years ago when I was on this very campus, graduating as a medical doctor.

I hence would like to briefly reflect on the history of this university and how it came about in the first place. It was to address the gross imbalances of race in healthcare training facilities in our country. Regretfully at that stage it was perceived to be a "Bantustan" facility.

We are absolutely delighted that our Alma mater has been re-launched and re-branded to Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University (SMHSU), recently with a renewed fresh image.

It has been named after one of our eminent struggle era leaders of our country, and one of those who were passionate about equity in tertiary training and education.

He fought gallantly to demonstrate his conviction and sentiment on the subject. Hence, I want to salute him today, as I stand here before, you for his invaluable contribution towards our education. In his honor, I would like to announce a “Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University/Afrocentric Health” bursary for an outstanding female student which I will launch today.

In a country that is diverse in equity, with both first and third world facilities and services, which are not in keeping with high levels of poverty and myriads of social challenges: I believe that this esteemed institution should make major accomplishments in training which can provide value add to address gross inequality in healthcare.

With only one out of six people able to afford medical aid membership, the healthcare sector faces the daunting challenge of providing affordable, equitable quality healthcare for all its citizens. The recent World Health Organization survey of costs in healthcare globally showed that South Africa relatively ranks quite

high in healthcare costs. As a sector, we need to reflect seriously on this. As this institution we should pause to find answers.

I am proud of your achievements today, because YOU are the solution to this problem and it is only by getting more qualified and highly skilled medical professionals like yourselves that we can start to overcome some of the healthcare hurdles we face as a country. It is important for us also to indulge in research and development of cutting edge technology and systems that can enable us to render world class, affordable and accessible healthcare.

As you graduate today, you should remember that you must take a holistic approach to your profession. Remember you will have to play a multiple role in your communities, A healer; A psychologist and also a friend; Your role would be multi-faceted.

Being a healthcare professional is about being selfless and passionate when rendering the healthcare needs of your community. Let us not only use our position to accumulate wealth and status and lose sight of our entire responsibility.

We look back with pride when we reminisce and remember our pioneers such as Dr. Xuma, Dr. Ntato Motlane, Prof. ET Mokgokong, the Marivate brothers, who are pioneers that were integrated entirely in our society during the dark days and served their nation with pride and humility.

Cecilia Makiwane and other healthcare professionals, really held the candle fully lit in their hands, and they dared not drop it, nor let it flicker.

Personally, I believe that it is critical that you dedicate a certain period of your life towards the public health sector. The greatest need for the skills you have developed here is in the public health sector and rural communities, and this is where you will be exposed to medical situations which will develop your experience and skills to the fullest. Bearing in mind the lack of resources within the public healthcare sector. You should not use this as an excuse not to serve.

The support the state commits to education through bursaries and subsidies is also commendable, and you are amongst multiple intended recipients of these initiatives.

I also urge you to be patient. You may well be qualified but that does not mean you have arrived. In many ways, your life's journey has only just begun. When I walked out of this institution in 1987, I thought that when I opened the doors to my private practice there would be long queues waiting for me. Little did I know how wrong I was...I had to exercise a great deal of patience and humble myself to anybody who had the potential of being my patient or victim!!

I nearly gave up when the very first day I opened my practice, a huge storm blew the roof of my practice completely flooding it and

destroying it; And I also nearly gave up after three days, having rebuilt and re-opened, not one single patient had come through my doors. I lay on the couch as if I was the patient to console myself. However, on the fourth day, a group of elderly ladies walked into my practice and just as I was getting excited, told me that they were perfectly healthy but were there to support me as I am part of the community. I became affectionately known as “Mme Ngaka”.

In my heart of hearts, I strongly believe that there should be a close relationship between medical professionals and the communities they serve. Hence the word “GP” should rather be “Community Doctor”. Many of the challenges we experience today can be effectively managed if a strong partnership exists between the community, the state and the healthcare professionals that strive to create a healthy population and equilibrium. There should be a sense of ownership from all angles and also taking responsibility collectively.

One of my fondest moments in my practice days in Hebron was the baby welfare clinic that I established as part of my contribution to assist working mothers who were unable to vaccinate their babies due to work commitments. The lesson here is that as you succeed, you need to also take others along with you. It is an invaluable investment that will earn you the necessary stripes and respect.

You must always remember that you are dealing with people, who have feelings, who have their dignity but are vulnerable. By treating people with respect and honesty is half the battle won if you want to be a truly great healthcare professional.

As healthcare professionals, we must uphold the virtues of “Ubuntu” because caring lies at the epi-centre of our vocation.

We need to know that the choices, decisions that we take and the advice we give is often a matter of life and death.

I remember vividly, one day in my practice having to deal with a right wing Afrikaner gentlemen who was on the brink of death due to electrocution – Four month later came to thank me for saving his life and also to thank him for teaching him a lifelong lesson, that black people and in particular females needed to be accorded respect.

South Africa’s health systems are under a great deal of pressure and this is aggravated by our country’s heavy burden of disease. As you all know, our healthcare system is stretched to the limit by health issues such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and, more recently the increasing prevalence of lifestyle disease.

The National Department of Health’s NHI White Paper policy (NHI) system represents an opportunity to make a profound break with the past and lay the foundations for a universal healthcare system that will provide quality healthcare to all South Africans – not just those who can afford.

The NHI white paper released in December last year proposes solutions to reform the healthcare system in South Africa to address the prevailing levels of inequality and inefficiency. In essence, the proposed National Health Insurance (NHI) is a centralised health financing system that will pool funds which will be used to provide quality healthcare with a much broader reach.

Due to the socio economic realities I referred to earlier, this will demand substantial cross-subsidisation during the first few decades. However, I firmly believe that as long as there is a collective will to overcome the formidable challenges that exists – it is achievable. Hence it is for this reason that I believe that a solution to a successful healthcare system lies in the importance of these partnerships, inclusive of private healthcare workers in the pool.

Your graduation as healthcare professionals comes at a time of great change, where we face a new reality where we need individuals that are passionate about the health and the well-being of our society.

The past few years of your life is proof not only of your commitment to your personal goals to uplifting yourself and society but also of your resilience, hard work and dedication to excellence. Your graduation today, demonstrates that you have the discipline, stamina and the mental aptitude and all the qualities of true champions who are able to take their place at the forefront of the future of our society.

As I've said earlier, today is only the beginning. You have conquered the first mountain and, as you explore the terrain of the rest of your life and the bright future you have ahead of you, you will quickly discover there are many more mountains to conquer, you need to specialise and be exceptional in your offerings. After all, as the founding father of our constitutional democracy, Nelson Mandela, said:

“After climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb.”

I encourage you to continue your journey and to respect your profession.

Being a medical professional means you are at the very centre of our social fabric. You are the men and women on whom this society pins its hopes for sound health and peace of mind.

It will not be easy. As you all know, I moved from being a community doctor to a healthcare entrepreneur and now I've progressed to join the industrialists in my country in manufacturing pharmaceuticals as well as in the medical aid industry.

One of my biggest challenges was in 1999 when my company went “belly up”! At that moment, tough life choices and decisions had to be made. For me it was a dark cloud , one couldn't help but remember also the social unrest in 1976 when I was still at university,

the unrest during the mid '80s and early 90s and the many other storms we have faced since. You also have to appreciate that our struggle for economic emancipation is very hard and is still ongoing. You have all read about issues of racism that have sparked recently.

You should never ever think that big business is fun and that you make all those millions easy. Let me tell you, it is very difficult to make that first million!

What I learnt from this experience was that tough situations don't last, but tough people do. Looking at my life now with the numerous accolades and achievements that I have been fortunate to have been granted, I attribute these to the same qualities that I know you possess which are:

- having a specific goal
- committing to that goal through hard work and resilience
- and doing whatever it takes to achieve that goal
- and to hang in there.

In conclusion ladies and gentlemen, your graduation cannot be taken lightly. It is the beginning of a new era in your life, of life long responsibility, and you have an obligation to honour this gift of education as well as privilege of saving lives. Also, never forget where you come from. Your parents, your families and communities have sacrificed all they have for you to be here today and they look up to you.

Finally, I encourage you to be aware of and follow healthcare trends, don't be left behind. You are community builders and as such, you play a key role, and serving the community must come first, before any other goal.

Always remember your Hippocratic Oath. Commit yourselves to live it in your professional and personal lives. Now, more than ever, our profession needs this commitment.

YOUNG LIONS! My fellow countrymen, my brothers and sisters, are you ready to take up this challenge and take a lead today in rendering exceptional quality accessible healthcare to our country? After all that I've said this morning, I believe you are.

Congratulations on your graduation. I wish you every success in your future career as fellow South Africans privileged enough to be regarded as reputable healers amongst us, truly representing the Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University (SMHSU) brand.

Thank you.