

Reflections of FSM Student Life and Career Developments

Speech by Dr Salanieta Saketa

**Permanent Secretary for Health at the 125th Anniversary of the Fiji School of Medicine*

Good afternoon.

It is a pleasure and great honour for me to be given the opportunity to speak at the 125th anniversary celebration of an incredible institution that has moulded my life and changed Fiji, the Pacific and even the world and I would say still has the potential to do immeasurably more in the years ahead than it has already achieved over this past century.

Peter has asked me to speak on the theme “Reflections of FSM Student Life and Career Developments”.

To reflect on my student life at FSM would take me back 27 years as I belonged to the class 1983-1988 of the MBBS program.

First and foremost I did not have the privilege and advantage of Microsoft Word and the Internet then. I made sure that I undertook careful research for this speech and browsed the fsm.ac.fj website apart from others. I thought the hot news on the website was the ‘Dean’s Message’ and the clear expression of the Fiji School of Medicine Vision of “to be the leading health workforce academic education and research institution in the Pacific Region” and a Mission “to provide education programs and conduct research in order to graduate compassionate and competent health professionals to improve the health of the people in the Pacific Region”.

I wish to congratulate the Dean, Professor Ian Rouse and the members of his faculty for the passion and commitment to create an environment that is conducive to learning and enables students to achieve their potential and to become respected and productive members of society.

It is quite phenomenal to look back now with the memory of just the old Tamavua campus and the much aspired Hoodless House which seemed like jewel then and realize that this small developing nation together with the support of our development partners was willing to pour very precious resources in developing this institution to what it is today.

It almost became ‘de javu’ for me too as the Head of School (that was what the Dean was called then) was also an Australian called Professor Harry Lander. I could still vividly remember what he said to me at our graduation reception at the Tradewinds Hotel then now called Novotel that what would give him the greatest pleasure and satisfaction would be to see us become future health leaders of Fiji and the region. I cannot recollect if the school had a vision and mission statement then but he sure was a visionary man and I am also reassured that our ancestors were visionary enough to chose this path of ensuring wholesome and relevant medical education for this nation and the Pacific as a whole.

People have sometimes asked me why I chose medicine as my vocation. To be honest with you I never chose to be a doctor and in fact my choice of vocation was to be a teacher and possibly this stemmed out of the fact that I had some very excellent teachers at both primary and secondary level education and they became my role models.

I personally believe that my becoming a doctor was a calling from God as the PSC Training Division following my Foundation Science year at USP in 1982, handpicked

me to study medicine, in order to make up the quota for the “iTaukei”, to the Fiji School of Medicine. Mind you the “iTaukei” label was not there then and I am still trying to get used to this too!

The admission policy into the Fiji School of Medicine then was a 50% for the “iTaukei” or Fijians as we were called then and 50% for Rotumans and Others. This of course has also changed.

My parents who were humble migrants from Matuku, Lau who moved to Suva to find a better life for their children informed me that they had been praying for me to become a doctor as they had a deep faith in God and thus explains my conviction.

Our class was the second intake into the new MBBS curriculum of the Fiji School of Medicine and we were fortunate not to be the guinea pigs however we were still part of the transition phase and had to accept the change from a five year MBBS program to a 6 year program in mid-course when an additional student internship year was recommended by the curriculum review team.

We started off with a class roll of 38 comprising students from Fiji, Cook Islands, Samoa, FSM and the Solomon Islands and by the end of the 6 years there were only 20 of us left to graduate, which was almost a 50% dropout rate. I actually never had the time to calculate this dropout rate then, as I was damn working hard to get through the 6 academic years.

I am pleased to also announce that most of my colleagues of the class of 1983-1988 for Fiji have remained to serve in health in Fiji with me and leaders in their own career choices such as the likes of Dr James Fong, Consultant Obstetrician/Gynaecologist, CWMH; Dr Tharid Ali, DMO Western; Dr Praveena Ali, SDMO Lautoka/Yasawa; Dr Emosi Taloga, Consultant Orthopaedics, CWMH; Dr Eka

Budromo, Consultant Pathologist, CWMH; Dr Josaia Samuela, National Adviser Family Health and last but not the least Dr Tevita Baravilala, Consultant Physician and Head of Cardiology Unit, CWMH.

I must admit that studying medicine is hard work and requires a consistent study life but we also had to have a balanced life and to have time to take on extra-curricular activities in order to stay sane I guess.

Our preclinical years of year 1 and year 2 were spent at the Tamavua campus where one’s life revolved around educating the mind with the human anatomy, dissecting cadavers and sleeping with human bones. Additionally we were tasked to deplete the toad population at Tamavua and to memorize Gannon word by word in order to learn physiology. Notwithstanding concocting the right formulations to learn biochemistry.

These were all done via a half-starved body even though funny enough I still sometimes crave for those dhal soup and curried bones as we called it, served by Krishna and with basic living conditions.

I often wondered whether medical studies were akin to a test for survival and endurance.

Despite the challenges, we weathered student life by learning to enjoy ourselves through sports and social activities and the much-anticipated annual event had been the annual sporting competition between FSM and LTC. I also took on a liking to student association activities and became an executive member of the FSM Student Association for 2 consecutive years where I had the honour of being its secretary.

Noting from this discourse I was already hooked into medicine. I had the dream that I could change the world by curing diseases and alleviating people’s miseries.

My FSM student life spanned the period that

saw the advent of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the Ebola virus together with innovations in medical education such the introduction of OSCEs rather than being confined to vivas and also to COPCs to name a few.

On the socio-political front we experienced the first 'coup de tat' for Fiji whilst in our fifth year of medical studies and had to consult the Oxford Dictionary to understand what this meant. We also had our first experience of the curfew and it felt like we were wild cats under restraint.

Nonetheless, I think there has never been such an exciting time for medical education and medicine as now. Who would have thought of the Internet and its impact on medical education 20 years ago? I could not even comprehend what it would look like 10 years from now as we move into distance and flexible learning, video-conferencing and being introduced into open source technology and the internet cloud!

There is certainly a great opportunity for the use of information technology to get education out to more people and improve the experiences, including the need for continuing professional development as a legal requirement under the 2010 Medical & Dental Practitioners' Decree.

My aspiration after graduation was to become a paediatrician. This of course changed following my rural posting where I developed the interest to pursue a career in public health and community medicine. I was also surprised at myself for this turn of event given that community medicine and public health was my most neglected subject of study like most of us did and which I strived only to pass. This had been a hangover of our clinically or curative oriented medical curriculum at that time. I believe that this has changed dramatically over the recent years as I appraised the array of undergraduate and post-graduate courses towards public health outlined in the FSM website.

I also believe that public health and biology should become key focus areas in medicine into the future as we prepare ourselves for emerging and re-emerging diseases such as SARS, the pandemic flu, multi-drug resistant TB, non-communicable diseases and recent threats such as the Super bug associated with unscrupulous use of antibiotics and poor prescribing habits of clinicians.

As alluded to earlier my interest in public health was influenced by a lot of my mentors and role models who were public health gurus of their time namely Dr Mataitoga, Dr B P Ram, Dr Aisea Rafai, Dr Asinate Boladua and the late Dr Vilikesa Rabukawaqa to name a few.

I remember vividly my professor saying to me as I pursued my post-graduate degree in public health at the Hebrew University in Israel saying to me that once I chose public health to be my vocation there was no turning back. It would require a change in mind-set to that of a clinician and sometimes they can seem to be opposing when in fact they should really be complementing each other.

To conclude I will say that most if not all who are sitting in the audience today belong to a privileged and fortunate group by way of our education and the choice of medicine or health as a vocation. This would not have been possible without the support of our families, mentors and teachers and the "Hippocratic Oath" is taken to also remind us of this.

In my 20 years of professional life I have only had two opportunities to recite the oath and that was at my graduation and last year at the FSM graduation at the Tatersall Gymnasium and it was almost a solemn occasion for me. I think we need to be reminded always of our oath for that charts the way that is expected to learn and practice medicine.

I have digressed a bit but what I actually would like to do today is to challenge you and

I particularly for the alumni on the question of how do we give back to society and to medical education in a way that will have a wider impact.

I believe the world is the limit on what you can contribute and impact in whatever field or career you have chosen.

Remember that what you and I have been privileged to gain through our medical education is just not meant for you but it is also meant to build up our beloved nation Fiji, the Pacific and the world at large.

I have noted the intention to grow the alumni of FSM as shown on the website and I would challenge the alumni to make a difference and create a Foundation that assist the less fortunate of our society who aspire to study medicine but do not have the means to do so. I personally make my commitment to this worthy course and encourage you all to join and leave a legacy behind for others to emulate.

Vinaka vakalevu and May God Continue to Bless the Fiji School Medicine.

COVER PAGE PHOTOGRAPH CAPTIONS

Front Cover

Center page Photo – The first Fijian dormitory and classroom completed in 1929. The Paediatric wing of the CWMH, Fiji is situated there today.

Front cover photographs from left to right:-

- Photo 1 – Students studying. (1950's -1960's).
- Photo 2 – Dr Jona Senilagakali Baravilala making a presentation on behalf of the medical students to HRH Prince Philip in 1952, during their visit to Fiji whereby they officially opened the Central Medical School at Tamavua. It is now The Public Health School of the College of Medicine, Nursing and Health Science.
- Photo 3 – The Honourable Dr. Apenisa Kurusaqila, the Minister of Health & Social Welfare 1984
- Photo 4 –Central Medical School Graduation in 1948
- Photo 5 – Central Medical School Graduation in 1952
- Photo 6 –Library of the Central Medical School
- Photo 7 – Assistant Medical Practitioners and Nursing Students.

Back Cover

Back cover photographs from left to right

- Photo 1 - The Diploma in Surgery and Medicine graduates with their certificates and prizes at the Fiji School of Medicine's graduation ceremony at the Suva Civic Center. From left are Rajesh Kumar Ishri, Ranjini Kumar and Ami Chandra.
- Photo 2 - Graduates Puspha Kant Raman (left) and Kushma Wati Singh, the two star graduates who topped the honours list at the Fiji School of Medicine graduation.
- Photo 3 – Graduates of 2002
- Photo 4 - Dr Baldeo Singh and Lusiana Lotu Bolalailai
- Photo 5 – 2004 Solomon Islands graduates with Dr. Rogers and Dr. Pikacha