

CORNELL CHRONICLE

Dean Kotlikoff reminds Class of 2009 veterinarians that altitude depends on attitude

By Krishna Ramanujan | May 23, 2009

As Cornell's graduating class of doctors of veterinary medicine transition from books, classrooms and labs to professional practice, many will begin traditional postdoctoral training, and others have plans to pursue more unusual careers: One grad will join a dairy ambulatory practice, another will embark on a primate medicine residency and a third will conduct avian influenza research in Taiwan.

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Regardless of their paths, Michael Kotlikoff, the Austin O. Hooey Dean of the College of Veterinary Medicine, sees them as well-prepared for their careers ahead. As he cloaked the 81 graduates with ceremonial hoods May 23, a day before their formal recognition at Commencement, he told them: "You survived the rigors and routines of the No. 1-ranked veterinary college in the nation. You leave Cornell with the finest training in veterinary medicine available anywhere in the world."

Then, joking that before they go they had to "endure" just one more lecture from him, he left the new graduates with advice.

For starters, he said, "your altitude is determined by your attitude," adding that "success is based on a positive attitude ... that can be developed and strengthened with time and experience."

Secondly, he warned the new veterinarians that trust takes years to build but can be destroyed in seconds. He pointed out that veterinary medicine is "built on relationships" with clients, employers and colleagues, and trust that takes time and consistency to build can be erased with "one careless action or thoughtless word."

"Learning never ends," he stressed. While Cornell has provided graduates with basic knowledge and tools, they should "embrace this next step as the first step of a lifelong process of learning and healing." Colleagues, employers and new experiences will all provide opportunities for learning, he said, but veterinarians must also remain critical thinkers who make decisions based on evidence.

The graduates should also recognize that they are "part of something really big," Kotlikoff said, because veterinarians "engage health and disease in the broadest possible terms, understanding that the health and well-being of the animals around us are critical to our own future."

Finally, he referred to the "Cornell compact" -- a contract between Cornell and its students to carry forward the legacy of a Cornell education. "Our responsibility is to continue to make you proud of us and of your degree ... your responsibility is to continue to make us proud of you."

Following a recitation of the veterinarian's oath, led by Edward Chapman '77, president of the New York State Veterinary Medical Society, Stuart Bliss '96, a lecturer in clinical sciences and the 2009 Pfizer Distinguished Teacher, echoed Kotlikoff's wisdom as the new doctors prepare for their careers: "You are not veterinary students any more, but open-minded curiosity will drive you to always remain students of veterinary medicine, and this will mark you as members of a great tradition of veterinary education here at Cornell."

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