



# University of Oklahoma College of Public Health Commencement Ceremony

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## *A Golden Age for Public Health*

by

**Charles W. Grim, D.D.S., M.H.S.A.**  
Assistant Surgeon General  
Director, Indian Health Service

“It’s easy to make a buck. It’s a lot tougher to make a difference.” This statement by former NBC anchorman Tom Brokaw sums up a lot of what I’d like to say to you this afternoon. I am passionate about the importance of the work and mission of public health professionals in our society today. We can and do make a profound difference in the quality of life for billions of people around the world. If job satisfaction were measured in dollars, public health professionals would likely be multimillionaires.

Despite a few administrative headaches and lots of jetlag from hundreds of thousands of air miles logged as the Director of the Indian Health Service (IHS), I definitely feel like a billionaire in terms of the great personal and professional satisfaction I receive from my work in guiding the federal health agency; a feeling that is shared, I believe, by the almost 16,000 employees of the IHS. This job satisfaction is reflected by the fact that it’s not uncommon for IHS staff members to devote 30 plus years to Indian public health. Several of our Navajo Area employees have even passed the 50-year mark!

During that 50 years, the IHS has significantly elevated the health status of American Indians and Alaska Natives. We have many daunting challenges ahead, but our steady progress and innovative approaches give us great hope for more major gains in health and wellness indicators. I sincerely hope some of you will consider joining us in this challenge through a career with the IHS. We have a very active recruitment program, and I encourage you to consider IHS career opportunities and incentives in 35 states across the nation, from Alaska to Florida.

The text is the basis of Dr. Grim’s oral remarks at University of Oklahoma College of Public Health Commencement Ceremony on May 12, 2007. It should be used with the understanding that some material may have been added or omitted during presentation.

As new graduates of this esteemed College of Public Health, I can sense your excitement as you anticipate the beginning of your careers in the varied and challenging aspects of public health. As a graduate of the University of Oklahoma College of Dentistry and as a native Oklahoman and a Cherokee, I share your pride in and gratitude for a fine education from our state. With four federally funded centers dedicated to research and practice in the prevention of diseases and protection of the public's health, your college has a deservedly fine reputation. Federal funding to the college has tripled over the past five years, so you have been here at a very productive and exciting time. I am especially proud of the College of Public Health's national leadership role, and appreciate its role as a resource to federal agencies, especially in the advancement of public health and research for American Indians. And with its low student-to-faculty ratio, the College of Public Health's dedicated faculty members are better able to provide the kind of professional mentorship that is essential to developing the health care leaders of tomorrow.

Our nation's substantial and targeted investment in public health has totaled hundreds of billions of dollars in recent years in critical areas such as preparation for a possible pandemic flu. Overall the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has invested \$289 billion over the past 5 years in the health and welfare of Americans. Just in the last 2 years, nearly \$6 billion has been directed to pandemic flu preparedness. This huge financial investment has created a current period of expansion, construction, and research that I believe will be viewed in future years as a golden era of public health. How fortunate for you as new graduates to be entering our field at this opportune time, and how fortunate for all of us to have you available to contribute your youthful energy and expert training during this time of international concern about pandemics, food safety, and sanitation.

While you represent our new 21<sup>st</sup> century, I'd like to take a moment to review the 10 most significant public health advances of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Why? Because for us to do well in the future, it's essential to understand and appreciate our past history and progress in public health. And who knows—you may be responsible for a discovery that makes it into the top 10 public health advances in the 21<sup>st</sup> century!

According to the Centers for Disease Control, the 10 great public health achievements from 1900 through 1999 were:

- Vaccinations
- Motor-vehicle safety
- Safer workplaces
- Control of infectious diseases
- Decline in deaths from coronary heart disease and stroke
- Safer and healthier foods
- Healthier mothers and babies
- Family planning
- Fluoridation of drinking water
- Recognition of tobacco use as a health hazard

According to the CDC, these achievements are responsible for an average of 25 years out of the total 30 years of lifespan gained during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, smoking cessation and blood pressure control coupled with improved access to early detection and better treatment has resulted in a 51% decrease since 1972 in death rates for coronary heart disease. Healthier mothers and babies have resulted from better hygiene and nutrition, availability of antibiotics,

greater access to health care, and technological advances in maternal and neonatal medicine. Since 1900, infant mortality has decreased 90%, and maternal mortality has decreased 99%. These are just a few illustrations of how we have gained 25 years in average life spans.

For most of you, that's as long as you lived so far! Consider that we live that much longer because of the work and advocacy of public health professionals. Those years amount to a whole lot of additional living, loving, learning, and giving back to our society.

As I said at the start of my remarks, our work in public health offers a tremendous chance to make a difference with our careers. I know each time I speak at the opening of a newly constructed IHS health facility, I can almost feel the appreciation and anticipation of the tribal members who will at last have access to state-of-the-art medical care in a beautiful, culturally appropriate building. You see, each of our new facility incorporates tribal designs, shapes, or colors to help our American Indian and Alaska Native patients feel at home.

As the Director of the Indian Health Service, I have strongly promoted three health initiatives to address and lessen the health challenges and disparities facing Indian people today. New facilities such as the health centers recently dedicated in Clinton and Lawton, Oklahoma, are an important part of these initiatives as they provide a huge boost to improving the health and wellness of Indian people.

The three main health initiatives of the IHS are health promotion and disease prevention, chronic care management, and behavioral health. These initiatives are linked together and have the potential to achieve positive improvements in the health of Indian people.

Already, we have accomplished much with our health promotion and disease prevention initiative and its focus on Indian patients and communities. By engaging tribal leadership to help us reduce health disparities among American Indian and Alaska Native people through promotion of healthy lifestyles and other disease prevention methods, we are making critical progress for the future.

Chronic conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer, asthma, renal disease, dental caries, and depression have become increasingly prevalent in Indian communities and are placing growing demands on our health care system. The goal of our chronic care management initiative is to restructure Indian health clinical programs to more effectively manage chronic diseases in Indian Country by linking community-based primary prevention programs with patient-centered secondary prevention efforts.

Behavioral health is also linked to the other two initiatives. By focusing on effective behavioral health techniques side-by-side with tribal traditions and customs, we can bring proven behavioral health strategies and specific health promotion and disease prevention programs to American Indian and Alaska Native populations. We are also focusing on screening and primary prevention in mental health, especially for depression, which manifests itself in suicide, domestic violence, and addictions. And we know that mental health issues such as depression can make chronic care management more difficult and less effective.

Our challenge on these three initiatives is to bring together all the partners that can help – tribal leaders, tribal organizations, federal agencies, academic institutions, private foundations, and businesses —in order to improve the health of Indian people and eliminate the health disparities between American Indian and Alaska Native people and the rest of the nation.

As I said at the beginning of my remarks, I am passionate about the value of our work as public health professionals. Protecting the health and safety of communities, healing the sick, and tending to the needs of the poor and elderly all bring immeasurable job satisfaction and a strong sense of giving back. Your careers are just starting, but remember that you have within

your grasp the rare combination of opportunity and ability to make a significant difference in our society and our world.