

## The 2020 graduating class of medical students has seen COVID-19 up close, and they give me hope

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IMAGE DISTRIBUTED FOR UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE - University of California, Irvine medical school graduates show off their degrees. All students, faculty and guests were required to practice social distancing and take public health and safety precautions, during UCI's first "Drive-Thru" commencement ceremony on Saturday, May 30, 2020, in Irvine, Calif. (Jordan Strauss/AP Images for University of California, Irvine) (Jordan Strauss)

*By Dr. Richard E. Hoffman*  
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The COVID-19 crisis has challenged the international medical community in a way not seen since the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918-19. Graduating medical students from the class of 2020 represent one bright spot in these grim times. The experiences they have had working and studying during the past several months will shape them for decades to come, and that is a positive. They have seen how this pandemic unfolded over the past six months, they have cared for people with the infection, they have confronted the risk to themselves and household members by caring for their patients, and they have observed how epidemiology and public health practice may affect almost every aspect of our lives.

Young doctors bring great hope and energy to the medical field. Students and residents hopefully have found that not only individual traits and behaviors affect one's health. The pandemic should have demonstrated to them that there are also social, economic, environmental and political determinants of health, and these factors affect the delivery and the outcomes of medical care.

If the pandemic ultimately helps graduating medical students incorporate a sense of the underlying factors related to health and the role of public health agencies, it will benefit the communities where they work and practice. A takeaway from the COVID-19 health crisis is the potential for a newfound empathy for the underserved and vulnerable, which promotes the spirit of medical wisdom. An added emphasis in formal medical education on compassion is helping tomorrow's doctors provide comfort to the public in a time that is full of unknowables and fear. Courage, truthfulness, dedication, cooperation, focus and perseverance are qualities we look for in students. Strong mentorship programs can reinforce these values.

I graduated from UT Southwestern Medical School in 1975. At the beginnings of my career, I was fortunate to have several mentors who embodied the spirit of medical wisdom. One was Dr. Seymour Eisenberg, the chief of medicine at the VA hospital in Dallas, who showed me what it is to be a good doctor. Dr. James Duke, who trained in surgery at Parkland Hospital and was part of the team of doctors who cared for Gov. John Connally on Nov. 22, 1963, was the director of my surgical residency, and he spent much time gently talking to his patients. Dr. Jonathan Mann, who mentored me as I began a career in public health, was a superb epidemiologist, who went on to become the first director of the WHO Program on AIDS and recognized the direct relation between human health and human rights. In my career, I have tried to follow their examples of combining medical knowledge and compassion.

Each year since 1943, Southwestern Medical Foundation, in coordination with UT Southwestern Medical Center, gives the Ho Din Award to an outstanding graduating medical student. The awardee has demonstrated both outstanding scholastic achievement and compassion for the suffering of his or her patients. This year it was my honor to present the award to Dr. Priyanka Gaur, who completed her studies with two degrees: an M.D. and a master of public health. I spoke with Dr. Gaur on several occasions about her studies, her beliefs, and her future. She gives me great hope. I have no doubt she will mentor future doctors the way I was mentored.

The pandemic is not over, and we continue to confront myriad problems. Dr. Gaur and her classmates make me confident about the future of medical care. The graduating students from the UT Southwestern Medical Center class of 2020 will help us through to the end of this pandemic. And they will be prepared for what comes next.

*Dr. Richard E. Hoffman is a trustee with the Southwestern Medical Foundation. He wrote this column for The Dallas Morning News.*