

Remarks
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for the
Commencement Ceremony
The University of Texas Dental Branch
Houston, Texas
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As Prepared

Regent Caven, President Willerson, honored guests.

I want to congratulate all of the graduates today.

Whether you enter the next phase of your life as dentists or dental hygienists, you have completed an arduous course of study, earned a credential that will serve you well, and taken on responsibility for the health of your generation.

We are grateful to you and happy for you and your families.

As someone who participates in many commencement ceremonies and as part of a rather lengthy list of speakers this morning, I am fully aware of my importance in the proceedings.

I know that you are looking at me and seeing me for what I truly am: one of the last speed bumps on the way to the party.

And so I will do my best to be brief.

Nevertheless, I have to tell you that – as a lawyer – that this is a great day for me.

It is not often that I get to address the members of a profession that is more feared than my own.

But at least you get respect.

Try as I might, I could not find anyone who knew one decent dentist joke.

I was asked to reflect on the centennial of the Dental Branch.

And so I immersed myself in the history of dentistry.

As many of you know, it is a long and not always pretty picture.

I discovered, for example, that the first known dentist was an Egyptian gentleman named Hesi-Re, Chief of the Toothers and Physicians.

I learned that William Dinly, a member of the Plymouth Colony, was the first American dentist until he was lost in a snow storm while making a house call.

And I learned that Doc Holliday, a graduate of the Pennsylvania College of Dental Surgery, practiced in Dallas before he went on to team up with Wyatt Earp at the OK Corral.

For some reason, Doc found drinking, gambling, and wild women more interesting than dentistry.

Surely, if had gone to the DB, he could have found a way to get his career and extracurricular activities in balance.

Doc Holliday was not your typical dentist ... but, back in the day, even more law abiding Texas practitioners could be pretty wild themselves.

With no professional standards in place until 1889, Texas was a safe haven for charlatans and quacks.

When the Texas Dental Association formed, one of its primary purposes was – and I quote – “to protect the profession and the public against the gross impositions of inexperienced and incompetent persons styling themselves dentists, but who surely know nothing of the practice, and are wholly without authority to operate.”

But by 1905 and the founding of the Dental Branch, the nature of dentistry was going through a major transition.

In 1905, about 6% of Americans had graduated from high school.

Ninety percent of the physicians in the United States had never attended college.

The average hourly wage in this country was 22 cents an hour.

And a – quote – “competent” dentist made about \$2500 a year.

Since relatively few American brushed their teeth until after World War II, dentists of most every sort had plenty of business.

But in many ways, 1905 was the turning point for Texas dentistry – a time when dentistry ceased to be purely mechanical and became scientific.

In 1905, sixteen years after the legislature passed the first licensing requirements for dentists in Texas, two proprietary dental schools opened here.

One of those schools was the Texas Dental College – which eventually became the University of Texas School of Dentistry – and, then, the UT Dental Branch.

Fifty years later, the Dental Branch established the first academic program for dental hygienists in Texas.

In fact, the history of the Dental Branch coincides with the professionalization of dentistry and its emergence as major part of our health care system.

From its beginnings, the Dental Branch has been a leader in research, innovation, and preventive dentistry.

One hundred years and more than 5,000 graduate after its beginnings, it is one of the preeminent schools of dentistry in the nation.

And as the most recent graduating class, you are the beneficiaries of 100 years of hard work, outstanding teaching, and continuing devotion to the advancement of your profession.

You carry with you all our hopes for an improved profession and a healthier Texas.

As we begin the next hundred years, we congratulate you and we wish you Godspeed.