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Thoughts from the White Coat Ceremony

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In September, I had the great honor and pleasure to preside over the White Coat Ceremony for the Class of 2012. Each year, both the Medical College of Wisconsin and University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health hold this formal investiture ceremony in which we welcome our new medical students and their families. But more importantly, this is our first opportunity to formally emphasize the commitment to service that is such an integral part of the medical tradition.

As I looked out at the audience—which included so many enthusiastic and idealistic, if not somewhat anxious, first-year medical students and their incredibly proud families—I wondered about their future. I personally believe that despite the evolving stresses and strains surrounding the practice of medicine in this country, the time has never been better to join the profession. The future is brighter than ever in terms of our increasing potential to make a real difference in health, not only for our patients and their families, but for our communities as well.

At the same time, we must recognize and confront the challenges that are facing our medical students—and the rest of us who practice medicine. Health care reform is an issue of utmost national importance. It is disappointing that the dialogue on this complex issue that we heard at the earliest phases of the presiden-

tial campaign season has suddenly taken a back seat to discussions on the current economic crisis. This is understandable. As people lose their jobs and as families struggle to put food on the table, other vital concerns can fade from their immediate attention.

We must push the public to take a broader look at these inter-related issues. We should explain to our legislators and our neighbors that there is a strong link between the current acute economic crisis and the ongoing chronic issues of health care reform. It is impossible to compete in a global marketplace if we do not have a healthy workforce. It is also very difficult to compete in the global marketplace if the cost to business owners of providing health care insurance places them in a non-competitive position compared to factories that might be located or relocated in other parts of the world. At the same time, we should point out that the health care industry, including biomedical and health technology companies, can revitalize the economies in parts of our state and country that are struggling with the transition from older economic models to newer, more globally oriented economic strategies.

When one steps back to take a rational look at addressing our economic and health care challenges, it becomes clear that we are not facing an “either-or” situation. The two

are intricately entwined. Attention to health care and health care reform will help us out of our economic doldrums. And if we ignore the health of the public, we will not be able to compete successfully.

There are no easy answers to the dilemmas confronting the health of the American public. If there were, we would have discovered them by now. But we must keep pushing to provide equal access to health care for all. Our health care delivery systems must be effective and efficient. We must quickly address the growing crisis in the health care workforce, including not only physicians, but also nurses, pharmacists, dentists, and allied health technologists. This workforce issue should be identified as a critical component of the health care public policy debate. Otherwise, if we address health care finance and access to care but not workforce development, we will be shifting from one set of road blocks to another.

I wish that all of you could have seen the bright, eager faces of our soon-to-be new colleagues at the White Coat Ceremony. Over time, as they complete their passages through medical school and residency training, they will emerge as a vital new infusion of additional talent and dedication. Please join me in a pledge to do all that we can to create the best possible systems and environment for them as they enter the practice of medicine.

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