

MU School of Medicine 2026 Commencement Address from Dr. Dima Dandachi

Dima Dandachi, M.D.¹

¹University of Missouri, Department of Medicine

Introduction

Dr. Dima Dandachi is an associate professor of medicine at the University of Missouri, where she specializes as an infectious disease physician and public health leader for HIV prevention and treatment. Dr. Dandachi was selected by the 2026 MU School of Medicine graduating class to deliver the commencement address at this year's ceremony.

"Carry your knowledge but lead with your humanity"

Good morning to the graduating class of 2026, to your families, your mentors, and to everyone who helped you reach this stage.

It is truly an honor for me to be invited today and to be among you. I remember what this moment felt like for me, a mix of excitement, pride, and a little bit of fear, because now it feels real. You are doctors.

Dr. Kane shared my roles and accomplishments in my introduction, but I want to take a moment to tell you a different part of my story.

I grew up in a relatively privileged, middle-class family. My parents were both educated, my mother is a pharmacist, my father an engineer. And yet, there were many challenges to get to where I am right now.

That path wasn't always easy, and it wasn't straightforward.

I am a foreign medical graduate.

I am not an American citizen.

I had no formal English education.

I am Lebanese. We like to say we speak French

I had, well...and as you could tell still have an accent.

I am a woman.

I am Middle Eastern.

And yes... I am short despite the highest heel I could wear.

Statistically, the odds were not in my favor. And yet, **here I am.**

I say this not to highlight struggle, but to make a point:

My success did not come from perfectly following a passion. It came from consistently following opportunities and being determined.

Today, you are surrounded by advice, follow your passion, do what you love, wait for the perfect opportunity.

Let me offer you different advice, something you may not hear from influencers:

Seize every opportunity that comes your way and do it exceptionally well.

Even if it's not glamorous.

Even if it's not your dream.

Even if no one is watching.

Because excellence compounds.

I remember reading *Gifted Hands* when I was much younger. Irrespective of how I feel today about Ben Carson as a figure. There is a lesson in that book that stayed with me. Ben Carson's mom did not have a glamorous job. But what she did, cleaning houses, she approached every task with precision, pride, and attention to detail. She always went the extra step. And that mindset helped shape one of the most accomplished neurosurgeons in the world.

There is a simple principle in that story:

Do not just meet expectations. Exceed them.

Do not just complete tasks. Elevate them.

That is how doors open.

Now, I want to talk about something different.

Years from now, much of what we taught you will be outdated.

Medicine evolves. Guidelines change.

And now with artificial intelligence, access to knowledge will become the easiest part of your job.

You will carry a phone in your pocket that knows more information and guidelines than any attending ever did.

You will be able to access more medical knowledge, faster and more accurately, than any one of us ever could.

So, the question is for you today, if knowledge is no longer your competitive advantage... so what will be your competitive advantage?

And I would say it is your humanity.

The only way AI will not replace you is if you are deeply, unapologetically human.

I once heard a physician say:

"I am the service animal for my patients."

The first time I heard it, I thought that was a little unusual. Maybe a little odd.

But I realized how true it is the more I thought about it. Patients do not come to us only because we are knowledgeable or because we are smart.

They come because they are scared.

Because they are vulnerable.

Because they want to be heard, seen, and understood.

And in a world that is becoming more digital, more efficient but also more lonely.

Your ability to connect will matter more than ever.

You may hear that being emotional is unprofessional.

That you should maintain distance.

That you should always remain composed.

I disagree.

I remember during my first year of residency, I cared for a young man with leukemia. He and his wife were sitting together when I walked into the room. The nurse has asked me to speak with him because he had decided to leave the hospital. He no longer believed chemotherapy was helping him. He wanted to pursue alternative medicine.

I tried to explain. I made my case and I failed to convince him.

So, I started crying because I truly believed that without treatment, he would die. And I felt that I had failed him.

I immediately apologized, trying to hold my tears, I told him I was sorry for being emotional, sorry for crying.

And he said: "Don't apologize. We need people like you. It means you care. That's what we didn't feel before."

He told me he would think again.

I don't know what happened to him after that.

But what I learned is that

Do not be afraid to care.

Do not be afraid to feel, to be angry, to laugh, to cry with your patients.

That is not weakness. That is medicine.

I want to say something clearly, each of you has something powerful:

Your education.

All your sacrifices and the sacrifices of your families and loved ones.

Do not waste that. We need you.

We need people who will solve problems we haven't solved

Who will eradicate diseases

Who will advocate for patients who don't have a voice

Who will stand up, even when it is uncomfortable.

There is no one more qualified than you to lead.

As you move forward, remember: Growth requires discomfort.

The body and mind only grow when placed under pressure. Anyone who goes to the gym understands this concept very well.

If you want to grow, you have to choose something different than convenience.

So, Be wise.

Be fair.

Be open.

Be accepting of those around you, even when you do not share their values.

And one last thing, ,...

If you didn't understand the joke, that means you never attended my lectures...

Please... go practice good medicine... and just order HIV and Hep C for every patient.

Some of you are laughing because you've heard me say this too many times.

But one day, you'll catch a diagnosis early and it will matter and you'll remember this.

Finally

Class of 2026,

You have earned this moment.

Carry your knowledge but lead with your humanity.

Pursue excellence but remain grounded in compassion.

Dream big but serve humbly.

And wherever you go, remember:

Your greatest strength will never be what you know.

It will always be who you are.

Congratulations, doctors.