

Sen. Susan M. Collins

USM Nursing Commencement

May 13, 2006

President Pattenaude, Dean Kirschling, Chairperson Rodgers, distinguished faculty, families, friends, and, above all, honored graduates: it is a special privilege for me to address you on this, your day.

This day marks a significant milestone in your lives, and for our health care system. Some of you will now join the health care workforce for the first time, some will be rejoining it, and others will continue their education. But all of you have dedicated yourselves to the delivery of expert, compassionate health care.

It is a responsibility you have accepted because you know that nursing is not just a job, but a calling. In answering that call, you have become the face and the hands of health care. It has been said that the best exercise to strengthen the heart is to reach down and lift someone else up. Your strong hearts led you to this profession, and the work that lies ahead will make them even stronger.

Your graduation brings to an end days of hard work and long hours. To come are days of even harder work and longer hours. If it's any consolation, at least you get to trade Mr. Sim, the patient simulator, for the wonderful sterling pins you have received today. Enjoy this moment and celebrate your achievements.

As you celebrate, I know you are mindful of the debt you owe to those who helped get you this day. The dedicated faculty and staff here at USM. Family members who helped make it possible for you to pursue your education. A teacher who planted the love of learning in you. An employer who set your schedule around your schoolwork. You owe them all a great deal, and you have chosen a profession that allows you to give back in kind. The choice you have made is evidence of your character and commitment.

You have made this choice at a time when our nation's health-care system faces many challenges. None of those challenges is as urgent, or as relevant to you, than the critical shortage of nurse and nursing faculty. In Maine, nearly 10 percent of

nursing positions at hospitals across our state are vacant, and we also face persistent shortages in our nursing homes, home health agencies, and other health care facilities.

Moreover, the Department of Labor estimates that America's demand for Registered Nurses will grow by 29 percent by the year 2014 in order to accommodate increasing patient needs and to replace retiring nurses. In the future, RNs will play an even larger role as 78 million baby boomers age and require additional health care services.

That is why I have fought so hard to increase funding for nurse workforce programs, which play such a vital role in recruiting and retaining nurses. And we have

had some success. Funding for nurse education programs has increased by almost 80 percent since 2001.

But now is not the time to take our foot off the accelerator. Current funding levels still fail to meet the growing need for nurses. Last month, I led a bipartisan group of 54 Senators calling upon the Appropriations Committee to allocate \$175 million in federal funding to address this critical shortage. This increased funding for nursing education and workforce development programs is essential: 72 percent of our nation's hospitals reported a shortage of RNs in 2004. This scarcity of RNs has put the lives of patients at risk. A recent study found that for roughly a quarter of hospital patient deaths and injuries, low nursing staff levels were a contributing factor.

Another study published in the New England Journal Of Medicine found that patients in hospitals with fewer registered nurses were more likely to suffer from complications like pneumonia, to stay in the hospital longer, and to die from treatable conditions like shock and gastrointestinal bleeding.

Beyond that lie the unprecedented challenges of the 21st Century. Since September 11, 2001, we have been reminded of just how important our first responders are, including nurses. In the event of another attack, particularly with biological or chemical weapons, or an outbreak of a pandemic flu, nurses will be on the front lines. The responsibilities you will shoulder must be matched by sufficient resources.

We already have seen the dire consequences of a gap between responsibilities and resources. The Senate Homeland Security Committee, which I chair, has just concluded its investigation of the response to Hurricane Katrina. While the story of Katrina is largely one of failures across all levels of government, it also is a story of extraordinary commitment and heroism.

Health care professionals, including countless nurses, were among the heroes of Katrina. Amid the devastation of Katrina, with facilities destroyed and plans shattered, they worked beyond the point of exhaustion to care for victims throughout the Gulf Region. They deprived themselves of food and water so that their patients would have

enough. Severe shortages of supplies and failed equipment were replaced by extraordinary ingenuity and energy.

Together, we can and must build a health-care system that will meet these challenges. In addition to becoming caregivers, healers, counselors, and consolers, you, as nurses, will become invaluable resources in crafting the needed solutions. The path to a better health care system will be difficult. We need nurses leading the way.

This will not be easy. Nothing in nursing ever is. But it is the call you have answered, and I know the burden will only strengthen your hearts. I thank you all for

*the commitment you have made, commend you for your hard work, and again offer my
congratulations for your outstanding achievements.*