For most medical students, the destination is a career as a practicing physician. But the routes to get there are varied. One option for medical students with an interest in pursuing research is to take an additional year to pursue that passion during their medical school training.

Jada Ohene-Agyei, an AMA member and student at the University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Medicine is in the process of completing a research year between her third and fourth years of medical school. She offered a look at the potential benefits of a research year for future physicians.

You get protected time

Medical students don’t often get protected time for scholarly pursuits. Taking a research year afforded Ohene-Agyei, an active member of the AMA Medical Student Section (AMA-MSS), the bandwidth to do research in urology. Because she is part of a master’s degree program, she also has gained skills
that can help her incorporate research into her career.

“When I started medical school, I knew I wanted to be a surgeon, but I didn't think much beyond that,” she said. “So the research aspect is something that was new for me.

“I realized during my third year that there really isn't dedicated time during medical school to really learn the ins and outs of research,” Ohene-Agyei said. “At some point, I knew that if I was serious about academic medicine and incorporating research into my career as a physician, I was going to have to take some dedicated time off.”

The AMA Succeeding in Medical School series offers tips and other guidance on a wide range of critical topics, including preparing for USMLE exams, navigating clinical rotations, publishing scientific research, and maintaining optimal health and wellness.

Research strengthens a CV

Ohene-Agyei is in the midst of two research projects. The first looks at how social determinants of health affects patients who must lose weight prior to a prostatectomy. The second project is a meta-analysis examining two different types of urological surgery modalities.

Both projects are taking place with the urology department at the University of Kansas Medical Center and offer her a chance to grow her knowledge and credentials for a career in urology, Ohene-Agyei’s preferred specialty.

“For a career in academic medicine, I wanted to diversify my CV as much as I can, and one of those ways is obviously research,” she said. “My plan is to apply [to] urology this fall. I know I want to go to an research-heavy program. And so to be as prepared as possible, I choose to do this research between my third and fourth year.”

Autonomy can be tricky

Though she is aided by mentors, Ohene-Agyei said her individual research projects are largely done on her schedule. That creates a time-management challenge that isn’t typical during medical school where students are often adhering to an external schedule.

“In a research year, your time is pretty much yours, and you divvy it up however you see fit,” she said. “So it's very easy to get off the schedule because you have to make it by yourself.”
“I try be structured with myself and have good time-management skills but be flexible with others because whatever opportunity they may present [to] you can be invaluable for your learning and growth.”

**Unforeseen opportunities may arise**

At the end of her research year, Ohene-Agyei will have a Master of Science in clinical research, but she has also been able to gain additional hands-on experiences that will pay off down the road in both her application and potential career in urology. The work she is doing on her meta-analysis was aided by a faculty urologist who gave her the opportunity to scrub into one of the procedures that she is researching—an open radical cystectomy.

“Getting to scrub into that case was really cool,” Ohene-Agyei said. “I learned a lot from it, and speaking with that surgeon afterward helped me frame the way I wrote my manuscript.”

**It’s not easy**

The curricular aspects of getting a master’s degree on top of the research can be very demanding, particularly for medical students who are a few years removed from the classroom.

“I went through an adjustment period going back in the classroom as a student instead of being in the hospital,” she said. “I was studying for tests, and taking biostatistics courses that I was ill-prepared for because I had not a real math class since, maybe, high school.”

“I just try to remind myself how valuable the information that I am learning is, and how [are]I can apply it for the rest of my career. I’ve gained a deeper appreciation for clinical research, and I’m glad I got the education to go further with it.”