Medical students may be future physicians, but there’s no reason for them to wait to contribute to the body of knowledge that informs patient care and shapes the science of medicine.

Medical student research is a mechanism for students to grow their skills, inform their career decisions and, most significantly, impact patient outcomes.

For medical students looking for an additional opportunity to showcase their research, the deadline for abstract submissions for the 2023 AMA Research Challenge—the largest national, multispecialty research event for medical students, residents and fellows, and international medical graduates—is July 24. In advance of that date, three medical student AMA members recently offered their insights on the importance of medical student research.

Honing best practices

Ashley Glass is a third-year medical student at the Kansas City University College of Osteopathic Medicine. Her research during medical school has largely focused on bioethics. She urges medical students to participate in research for the way it can change the future of patient care.

“lt's vital for medical students to engage in research throughout medical school and just their career in general, before and after school, because research is really the way that we can steer forward,” Glass said. “Medicine is based on what? Best practice. And how do we define best practice? And that is through research.”

“Research gives us the tools to really validate what medicine uses for treatment. And even just beyond treatment, how best can we treat patients as an individual? Research also helps us identify how to overcome barriers in medicine and access to care and biases. It really just shapes our entire future for
medicine.”

Value in the process

A third-year medical student at Oklahoma State University College of Osteopathic Medicine at the Cherokee Nation, Ashton Glover Gatewood’s interest in research dates back to high school when she participated in the Native American Research Centers for Health. She went on to work for three years on a project that was funded by a grant from the National Institutes of Health.

“I wish that every student would try at least one research project, just to develop those skills and to see a project through from start to beginning to see how you develop the question, how you find the research that supports your topic, and then evaluating the data, and coming up with how that can have clinical implications,” Gatewood said.

“That process teaches a lot of basic skills that help to benefit future physicians but also, I think—by being aware of issues that are going on in the larger research community—physicians give themselves a platform to make real significant change.”

Research shapes careers

Nick Bohannon is a fourth-year medical student at the University of Nebraska College of Medicine. He hopes to build on the research he did as a medical student in the years to come and has made research a major criterion of his evaluation of potential residency programs.

“As I approach the residency process this fall, I'm incredibly excited about interacting with programs that have strong research involvement,” he said. “For me, it's a critical part of my career. I plan to be an academic physician; it's something that I think is going to be exactly what I want for my professional life. And doing research during medical school, I think, is critical to having that success beyond.

“Having an understanding of the research process and strong grasp of how to get the work done will allow me to be productive in residency rather than learning the process during my graduate medical training.”