

Considering a dual degree? Those who did it share the pros, cons

SEP 6, 2017

Brendan Murphy

Senior News Writer

As dual-degree programs increase in popularity among medical students, the options available are also growing. In 2011, 7.7 percent of medical students sought another degree in addition to their medical degree, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges. By 2017, that share had risen to nearly 10 percent of students in dual-degree programs, with the joint MD/PhD being the most popular option.

To give medical students a clear picture of the dual-degree landscape, an expert panel offered insight on the subject during a recent discussion in the AMA Medical Student Digital Community.

What are the options?

Panelists in the discussion came from a number of different backgrounds, representing a variety of dual degrees paths. Here's what they had to say about their degrees.

MD/master's of business administration (MBA): This dual degree may equip students to work in an administrative or entrepreneurial capacity in addition to working with patients. Panelist Maya Babu, MD, MBA, opted to pursue a graduate degree in business to glean a "more in-depth training in finance and strategy."

MD/doctor of philosophy (PhD): This dual-degree track offers training in clinical medicine and basic science. "I decided to pursue an MD-PhD program to optimize what I [thought] (at the time) was the optimal path to becoming a physician-scientist," said panelist Hans Arora, MD, PhD. "It was a long journey but certainly afforded me a number of unique opportunities of which I continue to benefit!"

MD/master's in public health (MPH): Offering an expertise in health care policy and health management, dual degrees in medicine and public health are becoming somewhat common place.

“I’ve found that my MPH complements my MD and vice versa,” said panelist Ryan Ribeira, MD, MPH. “In my clinical work, having a background in health care systems allows me to better help my patients navigate to the care they need. And in my administrative and policy work, my clinical activities help me understand firsthand the effects of system inefficiencies.”

MD/juris doctor (JD): A dual degree in medicine and law may prove useful for those looking to pursue a future in health law or health policy. “Having a law degree certainly has an impact on my understanding of many medico-legal issues that residents confront on a daily basis,” said panelist Jason Hall, MD, JD who was a practicing attorney prior to making a switch to medicine. “Informed consent is a prime example. Legal education also focuses heavily on ethics which is readily transferrable to the medical setting.”

Is there an ideal time to pursue a dual degree?

Depending on the program in which a student enrolls and one’s own life trajectory, the time at which a physician or medical student pursues a dual degree can vary. Here were the panelists’ thoughts.

Dr. Ribeira: “I pursued my MPH between [my] 3rd and 4th year of medical school. My thought was that having a bit of clinical experience under my belt would help inform my MPH, and having the MPH done prior to residency would help me start getting involved in [quality improvement and patient safety] research during residency. ... In general, the earlier you pursue a dual degree the more it can help guide the direction of your career, but the later you pursue it the more you will be able to tailor your dual degree towards your specific needs.”

Dr. Hall: “I had a complete career as an attorney prior to making the switch to medicine. Medicine was always my first love so to speak, and I have been very happy since making the change. I will say that in terms of MD/JD dual degrees, I believe that law practice is a very important aspect of how my degree has benefited me in medicine. Much of learning to be a lawyer occurs after law school in practice, and it is the time I spent in practice which I believe has given me significant insights into health policy, regulatory reform, and advocacy.”

Does a dual degree pay off during residency interviews?

Dr. Babu: “This varies depending on your specialty, and the political [and] health policy landscape. Depending on your dual degree and the field (such as one with high turnover or attrition), having another career option may be seen as a disadvantage—you may be viewed as someone who may train for a handful of years and then leave residency....”

Vanessa Stan, MD, MPH: “At least in psychiatry, relatively few programs seemed attracted to [my] MPH per se, and more were focused on my research experience (much of which I did before the MPH). However, when it came up, it was definitely a selling point and I think having that extra experience made it easier for me to articulate what drives me and illustrate my points. For fellowship, it was similar.”

What are your non-clinical options if you pursue a dual degree?

Dr. Babu: “I think there are so many challenges in health care, I would say apply your dual-degree to solving one of these challenges. I've had a fair number of classmates who have left clinical medicine entirely to work for industry. I do not find them to be happy or to have a feeling of fulfillment. I think that is unfortunate. There is a need for non-medical skills to help improve patient care and workflow processes.

Dr. Hall: “With the appropriate background in law and completing medical school with or without residency, I'm confident that a number of non-clinical possibilities exist for MD/JDs. Some examples might include Big 5 consulting, health policy think tanks, in-house [counsel for] organized medicine, in-house [counsel for] medical device manufacturers or pharma, as well as case consulting, expert testimony, or a legal practice focused on health regulation, health insurance, device and drug litigation as well as torts.”

The expert panel discussion on dual degrees is one of many that will be periodically conducted in the AMA Medical Student Community. Another recent discussion covered how students can get involved in research. The community is a members-only forum designed to foster a digital dialogue among medical students and subject-matter experts from across the country. Sign up now to participate and check out the AMA's other digital communities covering practice management, medical ethics, medical education, health care innovation and more.

More on this

- Pilot program offers another view of Match applicants' skills
- Much to learn when med students leave classroom, enter boardroom