

DO vs. MD: How much does the medical school degree type matter?

OCT 6, 2020

Brendan Murphy

News Writer

As you ponder medical school, you may be wondering, “What is the difference between an MD and a DO?” In the U.S. there are two types of degrees in which physicians can practice medicine: MDs, a doctor of medicine, or a DO, a doctor of osteopathic medicine.

The two degrees reflect different types of medical school training. MDs attend allopathic medical schools, while DOs attend osteopathic medical schools.

Learn the six things they don’t tell you about life in medical school.

The similarities

About a quarter of U.S. medical students train at osteopathic medical schools. That number has grown significantly in recent years, with the American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine reporting first year enrollment at osteopathic medical schools rising by more than 40% over the past decade. That spike is, at least, in part due to additional DO-granting medical schools opening.

In terms of the requirements to apply to MD and DO programs, the criteria are virtually the same, with both osteopathic and allopathic programs weighing grade-point average and Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) scores heavily. The curriculum is largely the same structure, with students in both types of programs typically spending much of their first 12-24 months in the classroom and the majority of their training beyond that in a clinical setting.

Find out what the rise in medical school applications means for premeds.

Single accreditation, residency training

In the past, residency programs for trainees from osteopathic and allopathic medical schools have generally matched with residency programs through separate processes.

In an effort to simplify the graduate medical education (GME) accreditation system in the United States, the organizations that accredit GME—the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education and the

American Osteopathic Association (AOA)—have changed how they do things.

The 2020 Main Residency Match marked the completion of the transition to a single accreditation system and the consolidation to one Match for U.S. DO seniors and graduates.

Those changes also affect licensing. Most residency programs will accept the Comprehensive Osteopathic Medical Licensing Examination taken by DO graduates, as well as the United States Medical Licensure Exam which is taken by MD graduates and can be taken by DO graduates.

Mind, body, spirit

Historically, DO programs have touted their methods as more holistic. One aspect of that is the osteopathic manipulative treatment, defined by the AOA as a “set of hands-on techniques used by osteopathic physicians ... to diagnose, treat, and prevent illness or injury.”

Those skills typically mean that osteopathic medical students spend an additional 200-plus hours training on the musculoskeletal system in the curriculum.

“If a student is somebody who really enjoys that patient-centered approach and really is of the mindset that medicine is a mind-body-spirit relationship, a DO program will serve them well,” said John D. Schriener, PhD, associate dean for admissions and student affairs at Ohio University Heritage College of Osteopathic Medicine, one of 37 member schools of the AMA Accelerating Change in Medical Education Consortium.

Discover which undergraduate majors are best for medical school.

Most DOs choose primary care

The first fully combined MD-DO Match in 2020 yielded positive results for graduates from both types

of schools. An all-time high 6,581 U.S. DO seniors submitted rank order lists of programs, and the 90.7 percent PGY-1 match rate was the highest ever. That percentage is just 3 points lower than the 93.7% Match percentage posted by graduates of US MD-grant medical schools.

According to AOA 2019 figures, nearly 57% of DOs practice in primary care specialties: 31.4% are family physicians, 18.1% are internists and 6.89% are pediatricians.

By comparison, less than 30% of active U.S. physicians with MD credentials practice in primary care specialties: 11.3% are family physicians or in general practice, 10.6% are internists, and 6.8% are pediatricians. That data comes from the Association of American Medical Colleges.

Which is right for you?

One admissions officer provides this tip: Don't worry about the degree.

"People ask often: Should I apply to an allopathic or osteopathic school?" said Benjamin R. Chan, MD, associate dean for admissions at the University of Utah School of Medicine, also a member of the AMA Accelerating Change in Medical Education Consortium

"What I tell everyone is you should apply to both. Then if you get into both schools, just the same as if you got into two osteopathic schools or two allopathic schools, you need to do your research as a premed to figure out which is the best fit."

Medicine can be a career that is both challenging and highly rewarding, but figuring out a medical school's prerequisites and navigating the application process can be a challenge into itself. The AMA premed glossary guide has the answers to frequently asked questions about medical school, the application process, the MCAT and more.

Have peace of mind and get everything you need to start med school off strong with the AMA.