How humanities background could make you a better medical student

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If medicine is both an art and a science, it makes sense that a strong arts background—or an undergraduate course of study in a liberal arts major—can help make a strong doctor. An essay, “How to Fix the Premedical Curriculum—Another Try,” published in JAMA, goes a step further.

In the essay, Richard M. Ratzan, MD, touted the ways in which the humanities can offer lessons on the human condition and called for a bold change among medical school admissions officers: “That all students applying for admission to medical school major in the humanities with an optional minor in biology and science topics. ... No premed majors need apply; the science training will come after acceptance.”

John D. Schriner, PhD, is associate dean for admissions and student affairs at Ohio University Heritage College of Osteopathic Medicine (Ohio), one of 37 member schools of the AMA Accelerating Change in Medical Education Consortium. He wouldn’t go quite as far as Dr. Ratzan, saying he wouldn’t “advocate for a humanities background exclusively.” Nevertheless, he and Ohio do support a well-rounded educational portfolio in looking at applicants.

“We welcome anybody who has the grand aspiration, heart, soul and altruistic spirit to want to become a physician,” he said.

Learn more with the AMA about which undergraduate majors are best for medical school.

Schriner offered his thoughts on how a humanities background can be an asset in medicine.

A different perspective on patients

At Ohio, there are several ways in which students are given the opportunities to understand the
artistic aspect of practicing medicine. One element that is part of the curriculum is participating in art therapy with patients who have Alzheimer’s disease.

That training, Schriner said, is an exercise in empathy. Students who come from a humanities background may enter medical school with that skill set in hand.

“There’s value with folks coming from a different academic pathway,” he said. “They come into medical school with different perspective and life experiences. It really gives students an opportunity to assess the human condition through a different lens, and to realize that folks are more than just the symptoms they present. Having that perspective that is a little broader can help students assess the bigger picture of where their patients are coming from.”

For example, a December 2018 study published in the journal Medical Education, “Pre?medical majors in the humanities and social sciences: impact on communication skills and specialty choice,” found that medical students with premedical backgrounds in the humanities and social sciences may be more effective at communicating with patients.

Learn about the six ways medical students can master patient communication.

Comfort with the unknown

Ambiguity is a reality in medicine that some students might not be comfortable with. Schriner believes that is less often the case with more right-brained medical students.

“In medicine, things aren’t just black and white or finite,” he said. “Some things are open for interpretation. A tolerance for ambiguity is a very positive quality in a medical student or a physician. You are not always going to have the answer, and you have to deal with things that are going to cause you to think with both your left and right brain.”

Read about how volunteering as a premed can make you a better medical student.

A warning for liberal arts majors

While Schriner was quick to tout the benefits that liberal arts majors bring to the table—Ohio has had medical students with undergraduate backgrounds in art history and modern dance—he does think it behooves those applicants to get exposure to the sciences that goes beyond the minimum required biological science courses for medical school admissions.
“Even though the requirements might be a minimum of two semesters of biology, do yourself a favor and take some upper-level bio-sciences to build a foundation,” he said. “You should at least take biochemistry because you are going to be seeing it on the MCAT. If you take those upper-level classes, it shows a selections committee that you are conscious of wanting to broaden your foundation to help yourself when you transition to medical school.”

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.