Premeds: How do your ambitions line up with this year’s M1s?

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Brendan Murphy
Senior News Writer

As a prospective medical student, your future is wide open. Even if you have selected a medical school, that’s simply the first of many decisions that will shape your career. Where will you work? Which medical specialty will you pursue?

Data from the Association of American Medical Colleges—a survey of more than 15,000 matriculating first-year medical students—sheds some light on the answers to those questions for your predecessors who entered medical school for the 2019–2020 school year.

Which medical specialty to pursue

As will be the case with every criterion covered in this article, much can change with specialty choice over the years in medical training. Students typically don’t commit to a specialty until after their third year of medical school.

It makes sense, then, that among incoming medical students asked about the general specialty they were considering, the most popular answer was undecided, with 16% selecting that choice.

Excluding undecided, the top five specialties rising first-year medical students said they were considering were:

- Internal medicine or subspecialty—13.1%.
- Pediatrics or subspecialty—9%.
- Emergency medicine or subspecialty—8.6%.
- Surgery or subspecialty—7.5%.
- Orthopaedic surgery or subspecialty—7.2%.
In total, more than one-third of survey respondents indicated plans to enter a primary care specialty or subspecialty—a group that includes family medicine, internal medicine, obstetrics and gynecology, and pediatrics. About half of respondents interested in primary care indicated that they were considering a career in a subspecialty.

When it comes time to start seriously considering a specialty, the AMA’s Specialty Guide simplifies medical students’ specialty selection process, highlights major specialties, details training information, and provides access to related association information. It is produced by FREIDA™, the AMA Residency & Fellowship Database®.

Where to practice

When asked where they hope to work after completing medical training—a period of time that, including fellowship, could be close to a decade—more than a quarter of respondents indicated that they were undecided.

Among those who did pick a location, the five most popular states were:

- California—12.6%.
- New York—7.2%.
- Texas—5.5%.
- Massachusetts—3.7%.
- Florida—3.4%.

It is worth noting that, though students’ home states were not listed in the survey data, California, Texas, Florida, and New York are the four most populous states, according to the United States Census Bureau.

When asked, as part of the survey, how important choosing a medical school in one’s home state was as a factor in picking an institution, 30.8% of respondents said it was “very important” while 18.1% said it was “important.”

In terms of the local landscape of where matriculating medical students saw themselves practicing after training, 35.2% indicated that they were aiming for a large city (500,000 or more residents), 19.7% indicated a preference for a moderate size city (population 50,000 to 500,000) and 14% expressed a desire to work in a suburb of a large city; 15.8% of respondents indicated they were undecided on that question.
When asked whether they planned to work primarily in an underserved area after training 31.2% of respondents said yes while 53.8% were undecided.

**Clinical practice, research and more**

Some of the survey’s other findings offer insight on the career and life plans future physicians envision in these areas:

**Patient care.** An overwhelming majority of respondents indicated plans to participate in patient care during their career. About 16% of respondents indicated they planned to do so on a part-time basis.

**Research interests.** More than three-fifths (61.9%) of respondents expressed a desire to participate in research during their careers. While 43.6% of respondents said they expect to be "significantly involved" in research, only 2.2% indicated a goal to work in research full time.

**Career considerations.** When asked about “essential” considerations for career paths after medical school, “work-life balance” (50.1%), having a “stable, secure future” (45.7%), and the “ability to pay off debt” (45.2%) were most frequently cited. On the other end of the spectrum, the career consideration most frequently cited by respondents as “not important” was “social recognition or status,” labeled as “not important” by 40.8% of respondents.

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.