

Is a DO program right for you? What pre-meds should know

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If you are pondering medical schools, you have surely come across schools that offer a doctor of osteopathic medicine, or DO, degree—rather than an MD, a doctor of medicine—in your research.

About one in four U.S. medical students attends an osteopathic medical school, according to the American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine, which says there are 38 accredited colleges of osteopathic medicine operating in the U.S.

What should you know about pursuing training at one of those schools, and what does a DO career path look like? One seasoned DO grad who works as a faculty member offered insight for potential future medical students.

DO training

Isaac J. Kirstein, DO, is a dean at the Cleveland campus of Ohio University Heritage College of Osteopathic Medicine, which is a member school of the AMA Accelerating Change in Medical Education Consortium.

He trained at a DO school after watching how a sick family member was treated as less of a patient and more “like cancer cells and not like a total human being.” That experience, he said, was not how he wanted to practice medicine, and it was what made the osteopathic philosophy and training methodology attractive to him.

“Traditionally, a lot of medicine in the U.S. has been disease-based,” Dr. Kirstein said. “What is wrong with you? What are you missing? What deficiency do you have? The osteopathic philosophy is saying: What is optimal health and how can we get you there?”

“That’s a philosophy a lot of our students and residents appreciate. And we certainly—as a DO school—don’t have a monopoly on the concept, but it’s at the core of everything we do.”

DOs and MDs largely have the same baseline curricula. The largest point of divergence is the osteopathic manipulative treatment, defined by the American Osteopathic Association as a “set of hands-on techniques used by osteopathic physicians ... to diagnose, treat and prevent illness or injury.”

“No two schools have the same curriculum; we all cover the biomedical sciences, the clinical sciences, increasingly more social sciences and the health systems science. The osteopathic distinction is that additional training in osteopathic philosophy and manipulative medicine.” Dr. Kirstein said.

Read more about DO versus MD, and how much the type of medical school degree matters.

DO careers

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 and MD seniors. DO seniors matched at a comparable rate to MD seniors in 2022 (91% for DO grads, compared with 93% for MD grads).

DO seniors do tend to apply to more residency programs, however. According to data from the Electronic Residency Application Service, DO grads applied to about 90 programs in 2021—the most recent year this data was available— while MD grads applied to about 25 fewer.

DOs tend to practice in primary care, but that is far from their only path. The top five specialties DOs matched into in 2021, the most recent year this data was available, were internal medicine, family medicine, emergency medicine, pediatrics and psychiatry. Dr. Kirstein has seen his DO grads cast a considerably wider net in recent years.

“We have a greater placement in primary care residencies than the MD schools, on a percentage basis,” he said. “Our graduates practice along the whole gamut of the specialties, and that has opened up more over the years. The number of programs that our graduates are getting into continues to increase.”

When it comes time to choose your medical school, if it comes down to a DO school versus an MD school, it’s about your unique path, Dr. Kirstein said.

“I would absolutely encourage applicants to find the best fit for them,” he said. “All MD and DO schools offer a lot, and you should really look, specifically, what each school you get accepted into can offer you on your career journey.”

Find out more top tips for pre-meds on getting into medical school.