How med students handle uncertainty could predict career future

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Medical students’ level of tolerance for ambiguity may be closely tied to how they deal with stress and where they will practice, according to a recent study in *Academic Medicine*.

Researchers surveyed nearly 14,000 entering medical students as part of the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) matriculating student questionnaire. The survey asked incoming students to rate how they agreed with statements such as, “I don’t like to work on a problem unless there is a possibility of getting a clear-cut and unambiguous answer.”

The survey found that high tolerance for ambiguity was associated with students’ intention to work in underserved areas and with lower levels of perceived stress.

Tolerance for ambiguity—or the tendency to perceive uncertain situations as more desirable than threatening—is an important competency for physicians. For instance, the AAMC includes tolerance of and adaptation to stressful or changing environments as part of its core competencies for entering medical students.

The organization also deems “comfort with ambiguity” as a professional activity believed essential for graduated medical students entering residency. Similarly, the Accreditation Council of Graduate Medical Education considers tolerance for ambiguity an essential milestone for residents in certain specialties.

“Medical schools committed to addressing [underserved populations] may consider prioritizing personal characteristics, such as tolerance for ambiguity, in the admission process to enhance the likelihood that the future health care workforce will better address disparities in health care access,” the study said.

The survey also found that tolerance for ambiguity was higher in men and older students.
“If tolerance for ambiguity can be taught or strengthened through the learning environment, medical schools will need to develop evidence-based curricular and pedagogical approaches to nurture this quality in their students,” the study said.