

Doctors Back to School

created by the American Medical Association Minority Affairs Consortium

Careers in medicine— resource list

Being a physician is a rewarding career. Physicians care for people in a variety of settings; they can also research, teach and consult. Personal, intellectual and financial benefits go along with being a physician: however, becoming a physician takes patience and hard work. It also involves many years in school—undergraduate education, medical school and graduate medical education.

- **Undergraduate education**—four to five years at a college or university to earn a BS or BA degree. Students choose a program with a strong focus on basic sciences. This could include biology, chemistry and physics.
- **Medical school**—also known as undergraduate medical education. This involves four years of education at one of the accredited U.S. medical schools. After finishing medical school, students earn a Doctor of Medicine (MD) degree.

Note: Some physicians receive a doctor of osteopathic medicine (DO) degree from a college of osteopathic medicine. Osteopathic medicine takes a “whole person” approach to health care, instead of just treating specific symptoms.

- **Residency program**—also known as graduate medical education. Through a national matching program, newly graduated MDs enter into a residency program in the specialty they have selected. Residency programs involve training under the supervision of senior physician educators. Programs can take three to seven years or longer to finish. How long a program takes depends on the specialty chosen. For example, family practice, internal medicine and pediatrics require three years of training, while general surgery requires five years.
- **Fellowship**—some doctors who want to become highly specialized in a certain field complete one to three years of additional training in a subspecialty. Examples of these fields could be gastroenterology or child and adolescent psychiatry.

Once education and training is completed, a doctor must obtain a license to practice medicine in the state in which they are planning to practice. Most physicians also choose to become board certified. This means that the doctor has been tested to assess his or her knowledge, skills and experience in a specialty. This also means that the doctor is viewed as qualified to provide quality patient care in that specialty.

Learning does not stop when physicians finish their training. Doctors go on to receive credits for continuing medical education (CME). Some states require a certain number of CME credits each year. This helps to make sure the doctor’s knowledge and skills stay current. CME requirements vary by state, by professional organization and by hospital.

What does it take to enter and succeed in medical school?

- Hard work, desire, and dedication
- Motivation and intelligence
- Well-rounded high school and college education, including classes related to the study of human beings
- Completion of certain college courses
- Good academic performance (including high grade-point average between 3.5 and 4 on a 4-point scale)
- Timely and successful performance on the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT)
- Evidence of interest in service
- Leadership skills
- Good communication skills

Visit www.ama-assn.org/go/becominganmd for more information on becoming a doctor.

