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The Medical Student: An Unexpected Journey

David Ginsberg

Students of medicine stand on the shoulders of giants, learning centuries of accrued knowledge compacted into four years. Yet, the journey of each medical student is different based on his goals, preferences, and personality. I have benefitted from devoting time to research, where I appreciate and contribute to the work of all medical scientists.

I began medical school with some research experience. Since it took place during spare time in my undergrad years, however, it could hardly be considered a fair representation of what academic research entails. In my first brief foray into bench research I learned the basics of research protocols and techniques. More importantly I learned that I was better suited for the clinical side of medicine; I hoped that there would be chances to explore the world of clinical research in medical school. Between my first and second year I was able to secure a position working with an attending who participated in clinical research. Again I felt too constrained by time, and my experience too limited.

As my third year was winding down I had all but given up on a chance to participate significantly in clinical research. At the same time, I was having misgivings about continuing to pursue my chosen specialty of dermatology; most students matched into such programs had done quite a bit of research in the field. Before giving up completely I decided to look into potential options for further clinical research positions. I found that several dermatology programs offered one-year research opportunities to medical students, common among most competitive specialties. I took a position in one of the largest centers for clinical research of pediatric dermatology in the country.

This opportunity allowed me to gain experience in the field that interests me most, while allowing me to gain a year of experience in the clinical side of research. Several medical schools across the country, including Duke, Yale, and NYU, all have significant time for research built into their curriculum. While this may not be the norm in medical education, it does show that some top tier medical schools assign research experience to a high priority. The AAMC also shares this sentiment, as their Medical School Objectives Project of 2001 recommends that more time should be given to students wishing to pursue research during medical school.

After completing my leave of absence from school, I can say with absolute certainty that this year of research and immersion in the field of dermatology was a worthwhile endeavor. I believe that it would be an invaluable experience to any medical student with a curric-

ulum that doesn't place the process of academic medicine and clinical research at the forefront. It could also be of benefit to those who are interested in a specialty without first obtaining prior experience.

During my year off I was able to participate in the normal activities of the department: grand rounds, weekly didactic lectures, journal clubs, seeing patients. I was treated as a Sub-Intern and given responsibilities that allowed me to contribute to the team.

I was given my own clinical trial to run; I was in charge of every aspect of the trial, while still being afforded some oversight. Although it wasn't a large study, it still gave me incredible insight into the work of clinical research. There were also opportunities to pursue writing projects such as review articles, case studies, and smaller freelance articles. As part of the research team, I was also involved in bi-monthly research meetings my department discussed all of the numerous clinical trials. Although it would take much longer to achieve a full understanding of the details involved in medical research, one year of immersion undoubtedly created a foundation of understanding.

It would be difficult to compare this research year to any other time in my medical education. It felt like a yearlong clinical clerkship, but with the added benefit of contributions to clinical research. I have yet to decide if pursuing a career of research would be right for me. When the time comes, however, I will be as prepared as possible due to this yearlong search into the meaning and workings of clinical research.