



The Five-Minute Mentor: Is Residency Necessary?

I am the student affairs dean at a mid-sized medical school. One of my top fourth-year students has told me that she doesn't want to do a residency following medical school. She says that she's tired of the rat race and the pressure, and is thinking of going into research instead. How should I advise her?

The first step is to explore and validate the feelings the student has expressed—lots of people have doubts as they move toward graduation. The second step is to ask about how things are going for the student outside the medical school curriculum. She may be having health issues or relationship problems, or may even be experiencing clinical depression. If things are going well outside medical school, then it may be that she has come to recognize that clinical practice may not be what she wants. Ask her about her goals: Was it really her goal to be a practicing physician? Or was she responding to the expectations of someone else—parents, mentors, others? Maybe her goal has been to do research all along, but she entered clinical medicine because she did not want to disappoint others.

If you find that it is her sincere desire to have a career in research, then I would try to find for her a mentor who has followed the path of not going into a residency after medical school. Ideally, this would be someone who has entered a research career, but it may not need to be research only. There are a number of medical school graduates who have elected an alternative pathway. One (or more) of them might serve as capable mentors.

—**R. Kevin Grigsby, DSW**

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I suggest that she take some time to explore her options—maybe even apply for a rotating internship and then defer a year to think about her choices. She needs to speak with people in the basic sciences, as well as with

physicians who have done a limited residency and then pursued a career in biomedical research, to get some idea of what the different career paths look like.

She needs to understand that a career in research is not without its own set of time commitments and pressures. For example, being a top medical student does not in any way prepare her for a career in biomedical research. To be competitive, she may need to get a PhD (and that journey will look a bit like a residency, from a time commitment perspective) or, at least enroll in a masters in science program or in one of the physician-scientist training programs offered to junior faculty, if she could get such an appointment.

As to avoiding the “rat race,” as a physician-scientist she will be expected to secure grant funding to cover a great deal of her salary—a salary that, absent any clinical responsibilities (since she will not have a medical license if she does not do a residency), will likely be at the level of a PhD. This would put a great deal of pressure on her as well. If she should struggle to secure research funding, she has limited fallback options.

—**David J. Bachrach, FACMPE/FACHE**

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Plan A: I would advise her to do at least a PGY-1 year in internal medicine, if possible. She should choose a program (perhaps at our own school) that is relatively supportive and well regarded by its own students. It will be important for her to become licensed if she wants to keep her options open.

I would suggest that she take some time off at the end of her fourth year (assuming she can schedule this).

Plan B: Another option would be to extend her fourth year over two years, and take advantage of the “gift of time” to do something interesting and engaging, but not highly pressured. For example, she could work on a global health project, attend the London School of Economics, or engage in an interesting research project, depending on her interests. She would not finish her graduation requirements this year, so that she could remain a matriculated student.

Plan C: She could extend the fourth year to take extra electives for career exploration. I don't know what her interests are within medicine, and maybe she doesn't know either—perhaps that's part of the problem. She may want to extend her fourth year to take electives and do research in several fields to regain her excitement about clinical medicine.

—**Susan R. Rosenthal, MD**

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For someone who will be obtaining an MD degree and who doesn't do a residency, but waits a number of years after finding that research might not have been the best choice either, going back to do a residency five or so years away from the MD will be exceedingly difficult. The number of positions at the GME level is not increasing as rapidly as the increases at the entering medical school

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level, and thus the competition for those positions is going to be brutal. At the least, I would encourage the student to take a one-year internship so that she would have an option down the line, having obtained a license to practice medicine.

—**Norma E. Wagoner, PhD**
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A cardinal rule of career development is to close as few doors as possible. Since goals, conditions, and opportunities change—and since, at graduation, most physicians will expect four to five decades of healthy life ahead—it's smart to keep one's options open. Not starting a residency eliminates or reduces so many possibilities that I would advise this student to rethink this decision. Unless she is content to stop growing, pressures are unavoidable on any path. Perhaps

she is exhausted and is not able to access her core values or resilience such that everything looks like a “rat race.” If so, can she find a way to take a break without simultaneously taking such a drastic step?

—**Janet Bickel, MA**
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