



Medical School in More than Four Years: An Idea Whose Time Has Come?

BY SUSAN R. ROSENTHAL, MD

According to the AAMC Graduation Questionnaire,¹ 83.8% of medical school matriculants who graduated from medical school in 2007 finished in four years, 10% took five years to graduate, 1.6% took six years, and 3.1% took seven years. Although these statistics include a small number of students who had academic difficulty and needed to extend their academic programs in order to fulfill their graduation requirements, many of these students extended their medical school education to pursue research, service learning, joint degrees, or global health experiences.

Demographics

Students taking seven years to graduate include those who were in an MD/PhD program. More than 80 US medical schools now offer students the opportunity to enroll in such a program.² Medical Scientist Training Programs (MSTPs), supported by the National Institutes of Health, are found at approximately 32 medical schools. Other schools combine the MD with other degree programs. These include MD/MPH, MD/MBA, MD/MS, and MD/JD programs.

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The number graduating with joint degrees tends to be small.¹ In 2007, 0.9% of students received a BA/MD, 0.3% a combined MD/master's, 0.1% MD/JD, 2.5% MD/PhD, and 0.5% received other joint degrees. The largest increase over the past four years has been in the "other" category, which may reflect an increase in those earning MD/MBA degrees. Reasons students give for enrolling in joint degree programs other than the MD/PhD vary, but probably include the opportunity for flexibility in a future career path and the perception of increased desirability to residency program

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directors, as well as altruism and intellectual interest. Some medical schools provide scholarship support to their students who enroll in or complete these programs.

Students who are taking five years to graduate (10% of students graduating in 2007) include those who were enrolled in a one-year joint degree program or who have taken a year to do service learning, sometimes in an international setting.

Fifth-Year Opportunities

The desire among US medical students to become trained in clinical and/or basic science research has grown over the past decade. For example, Duke Medical School requires that its students spend their third year in research.³ Some medical schools have developed programs whereby students

can graduate with distinction after completing a research thesis, or who are first author on a peer-reviewed publication.⁴⁻⁷

The NIH,⁸ Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI),⁹ and the Fogarty¹⁰ and Doris Duke foundations^{11,12} have all developed outstanding year-long opportunities for US students who wish to be trained in research either in the United States or abroad. The HHMI's Cloister Program and the NIH accept talented medical students to engage in a year of mentored basic or translational research on the NIH campus.

Through the Clinical Research Training

Program (CRTP) at the NIH,⁹ students spend a year on the NIH campus engaged in a mentored clinical or translational research project in an area that matches their interest. In 2004, this program was expanded to accept 30 students a year, thanks to support through the NIH Roadmap as part of its Re-Engineering the Clinical Research Enterprise initiative.

In the Duke Clinical Research Fellowship Program of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, founded in 2002, students engage in similar opportunities at 12 prestigious medical schools throughout the United States.¹¹

The most recent program, the NIH Year-Off Training Program for Medical or Graduate Students, allows medical students to spend a year in mentored research at the NIH in basic, clinical, or translational research. Whereas the other NIH programs have fixed deadlines, this program has rolling admissions and therefore affords more flexibility to students who come to this decision later in their third year.

Global health is of increasing interest to medical students. The American Medical Student Association and the Global Health Education Consortium have both been active in encouraging and directing their interest toward service learning opportunities and curricular development. More recently, the NIH-Fogarty programs have offered excellent year-long opportunities for students to do research in infectious diseases in third-world countries.⁹ In 2005, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation began to offer a limited number of grants to medical students at the conclusion of their third year to pursue research in developing countries.

Longer Education Periods Should Be Supported

Medical school is no longer purely a four-year opportunity to learn basic science and achieve basic clinical competency. There are now myriad opportunities available for students who

wish to enrich their medical education with research, service, and other educational opportunities. These young physicians will bring increased expertise and a broader scope of knowledge to their future patients. I, for one, believe that this trend is a healthy one, and look forward to increasing opportunities and support for such endeavors. ❖

References

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