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Aditi Jani

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# faculty interview: pediatric neonatology

Interview with Brian Sims, M.D., Ph.D.

Aditi Jani

*Dr. Brian Sims is an assistant professor of pediatric neonatology and cell biology at UAB. A UAB graduate himself, Dr. Sims is a dedicated mentor to many budding physician-scientists. I spoke to him at his lab in the Shelby Biomedical Research Building about his education, his experiences in medicine and research, and his views on pursuing an M.D., Ph.D. degree.*

**Can you tell me a little bit about your education? Where did you pursue your undergraduate, medical, and graduate degrees?**

For undergrad, I attended UAB and majored in Biology. I also attended UAB for medical school and my Ph.D. in cell biology. I completed my residency in Pediatrics at Washington University in St. Louis [WashU] and did a Neonatology fellowship back here at UAB. I also did a post-doc at WashU for a year in developmental neurobiology.

**If I had asked you where you saw yourself in 10-15 years while you were in high school or undergrad, would you have said “Practicing medicine and doing research?” Why did you choose an M.D., Ph.D. track?**

During my junior year of high school, I decided I wanted to do pediatrics, but I didn't have a lot of exposure to research. In college, I did a summer program at McHarry Medical College where I saw some physician-scientists at work; after that point, I saw myself doing research in the future. Choosing M.D., Ph.D. was more about me wanting to be extensively trained in order to pursue and do basic science research. The M.D., Ph.D. allows you more isolated time to work on research, which is time you may otherwise never get.

**Can you talk about your experiences in your education and work at UAB?**

It was a very positive experience! In undergrad, I didn't have a lot of the research experiences that are available now, so they were harder to come by but still possible. I had some great instructors here at UAB. I think that whatever environment you're in after high school, you have to be a proactive learner, and I found that I was the rate-limiting step in my education. UAB is a great place to learn, and I wouldn't change anything about my decision to go here.

**What's a typical day like for you? Do you spend more of your time in clinical pursuits or research?**

I spend about 25% of my time fulfilling my clinical responsibilities as attending in the NICU, and I dedicate about 75% of my time to basic science research. I'm fortunate to be in a very supportive division [neonatology] that values basic science research. As a physician-scientist, you have to find the niche that is best for you and find where the balance is. Also, despite what you want, you have to be in an institution that supports you, so it's a cooperative agreement.

**Some people may shy away from an M.D., Ph.D. degree because of the extensive, rigorous course load and the major time commitments of the schooling. What would you say to this?**

Any commitment that requires that amount of time requires that the individual be 'all in' and 100% committed. If people are unsure that this is the route they want to pursue, then they may need more time to think about what they want to do. I equate it to marriage – it's not something to take lightly, so investigate and take your time before you make a strong commitment. It's a wonderful life, but it's one that I chose. Everyone has to make that choice for him or herself.

**For student who have interests in research and medicine but are unsure about M.D., Ph.D., can you talk about some of your experiences in the benefits of pursuing both?**

Ph.D.'s and M.D.'s think differently. Not that that's a bad thing, but the clinical world allows you to see problems firsthand. And that can direct your research interests, and honestly, as a physician, it should be part of the passion that drives your research.

**Any words of wisdom or advice for future physicians and researchers?**

Take as much time as you can to do rotations, even as an undergraduate. Get as much exposure as you can; it will ultimately make you a better learner, researcher, and physician. It's important to identify what your passion is early. Once you identify it, you will never be bored again. Don't lean towards something for the wrong reason. If you're going to a place you don't want to be, realize that one day you'll be there, so make sure you want to be there!

**Can you talk about your research in neonatology?**

My major focus is studying the vulnerability of the premature brain. In particular, we study neural stem cells and investigate protective mechanisms to increase cell survival. If the neural stem cells are protected against things like hypoxia and glucose deprivation, in theory, the animals and the human should get the same protection. This could prevent things like cerebral palsy, encephalopathy, hypoxia, and ischemia; so ultimately we have a basic cellular approach to this research.

**What is the most rewarding part of your job?**

First, dealing with children. Being able to be with families in their most critical time and to see a sick baby be able to go home with his or her parents. And secondly, being able to teach the “future doctors of America.”