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Pursuing a Research Career... Without the Doctorate

Paul Lee

If a student expressed interest in research and medical practice, most people assume that he or she will pursue a combined M.D./Ph.D. degree. Despite the utility of a combined degree, the prospect of extra years in school deters some students. However, those extra years may not be necessary for all students who wish to incorporate scientific research into their medical careers.

Most people believe that physicians exclusively care for patients. While private practitioners are often pure clinicians, academic physicians defy this conception. In an article published in *Academic Medicine*, Dr. Steven Kanter describes the field as one that “encompasses the traditional tripartite mission of educating the next generation of physicians and biomedical scientists, discovering causes of and cures for diseases, and advancing knowledge of patient care while caring for patients” (Kanter 2008). Although many academic doctors do not possess combined degrees, they can be involved in research and teaching as well as clinical care. Dr. Ali Ahmed of the UAB School of Public Health and Dr. Harrison Walker of the UAB Department of Neurology, both medical doctors, spoke about their lives as physician-scientists.



Ali Ahmed, M.D.



Harrison Walker, M.D.

Dr. Ahmed studies heart failure in older adults, the leading cause of hospital admission for this age group. While undergoing training in geriatric medicine, he learned that little was known about how to care for older patients with heart failure. He understood that more research needed to be conducted in this area, so it became a natural choice for the focus of his studies.

Dr. Walker’s research focuses on clinical conditions such as Parkinson’s, a disease characterized by loss of muscle function due to degradation of nerve cells in the brain. “My research uses clinical and electrophysiological methods to investigate how deep brain stimulation helps patients with neurological disorders,” he explained.

The desire to conduct research is an important motivator for an academic career. Research findings can enable a physician to make an impact outside of his or her own clinic. Dr. Walker expressed that while he enjoys caring for patients, he also enjoys the creative process of research and the opportunity to contribute to a body of knowledge that can improve quality of life for patients.

Dr. Ahmed echoed these sentiments, stating, “My clinical skills can only help my patients; however, findings from clinical research published in the peer-reviewed medical literature have the potential to help other patients as well, those you will not and cannot see.”

Not surprisingly, the life of an academic doctor differs vastly from the private practitioner. Doctors in private practice are independent; they can decide how much they work and how they spend their work hours. Academic doctors are not as independent because they are employed by medical schools and carry researching and teaching duties in addition to seeing patients. However, they do have some freedom to decide how to divide their daily routines between the clinic and their research.

In fact, M.D.’s can focus solely on their research, but this is rare. “M.D.’s are trained to take care of their patients, and most are emotionally attached to that skill,” explained Dr. Ahmed. “Most M.D.’s have at least some amount of clinical practice in parallel with their research; this clinical work ideally will be the basis of or a complement to their research interests.”

Dr. Walker spends one day a week seeing patients and half a day in the operating room assisting his neurological team with the placement of brain stimulators. He explained that lab funding can also influence how physician-scientists divide their time. “It helps greatly to have funding because

this allows you to have more protected time to do research,” said Dr. Walker.

“Depending on your funding and the nature of your research work, you allocate your time between research and patient care,” explained Dr. Ahmed. “If you have multiple funded projects that require a lot of effort, you may have to cut back your clinical effort. If you run into a temporary funding gap you may need to increase your efforts in the clinic.”

M.D. researchers are generally involved in research that is relevant to clinical work. After all, treating patients is the basis of medical doctors’ training. Translational research, which moves scientific knowledge from bench to patients, is one area in which physician scientists are very invested.

Dr. Ahmed considered obtaining a Ph.D. or a combined M.D./Ph.D. at one point, but decided against a doctorate because he was guided into more hands-on training in clinical research. “There are other areas of research, such as in the more basic science-related fields, where a Ph.D. might be more helpful,” he cautioned. Pursuing bench research is not as common for medical doctors.

As Dr. Ahmed’s and Dr. Walker’s careers demonstrate, many clinicians with only M.D. degrees have been successful in various areas of research. “An M.D./Ph.D. definitely gives extra sets of knowledge and skills,” said Dr. Ahmed. “Individual determination and perseverance, however, are probably more important for long-term success, whether M.D. or Ph.D.”

Source

Kanter, S. (2008). What is academic medicine?. *Academic Medicine*, 83(3), 205-206. Retrieved from http://journals.lww.com/academicmedicine/Fulltext/2008/03000/What_Is_Academic_Medicine_.1.aspx