



BECOMING A PHYSICIAN

A 3-Year M.D. — Accelerating Careers, Diminishing Debt

Steven B. Abramson, M.D., Dianna Jacob, R.P.A., M.B.A., Melvin Rosenfeld, Ph.D., Lynn Buckvar-Keltz, M.D., Victoria Harnik, Ph.D., Fritz Francois, M.D., Rafael Rivera, M.D., Mary Ann Hopkins, M.D., Marc Triola, M.D., and Robert I. Grossman, M.D.

It's been more than 100 years since Abraham Flexner proposed the current model for medical education in North America: 2 years of basic science instruction followed by 2 years of clinical experience.¹

Over the past several decades, major changes have caused the medical community to reconsider current educational models. These changes include increasing education costs, shifts in health care needs, the demographics of the applicant pool, and many scientific, pharmacologic, and technological advances resulting in increased specialization of physicians.

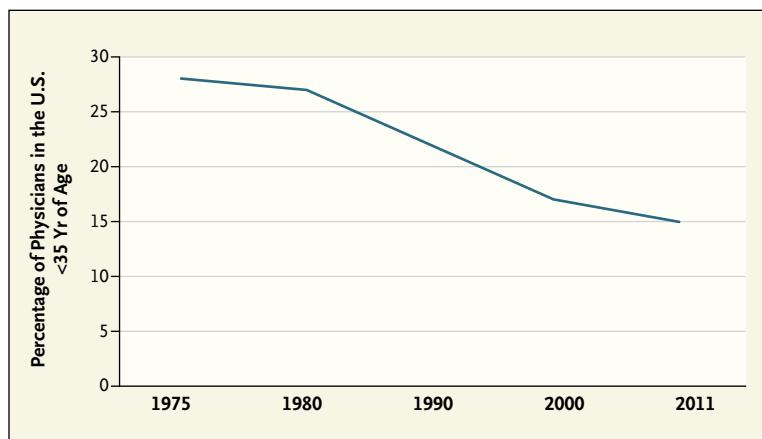
Oversight of U.S. medical education is compartmentalized, with standards independently set for undergraduate and graduate accreditation by the Liaison Committee on Medical Education (LCME) and the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME), respectively.

This system results in rigid, time-based, non-learner-centered training. Recognizing this limitation, the Carnegie Foundation recently recommended that education should “provide options for individualizing the learning process for students and residents, such as offering the possibility of fast tracking within and across levels.”¹

In the past 30 years, the required training period after medical school has increased substantially,² but the time spent in medical school has not been shortened. The average age of physicians entering practice has therefore increased. Since 1975, the percentage of physicians who are younger than 35 years of age has decreased from 28% to 15% (see

graph),³ as the prolongation of specialty training has delayed entry into the workforce, reducing the productive years of clinicians and physician scientists. Compounding the effect of the increased duration of training is the growing number of entering medical students who have taken “gap” years between college and medical school. National data indicate that the average age of first-year medical students is 24. At the New York University School of Medicine (NYUSOM), 55% of this year's entering medical students have taken 1 or more gap years.

Some analysts have suggested that the average duration of medical training could be reduced by approximately 30% — partly by eliminating 1 year of medical school — without compromising physicians' competence or the quality of care provided.² Two



Percentage of Physicians in the United States Who Are Younger Than 35 Years of Age, 1975–2011.

Canadian medical schools (McMaster University's Michael G. DeGroot School of Medicine and the University of Calgary's Faculty of Medicine) award an M.D. degree to all their students in 3 years. Several allopathic medical schools in the United States, including Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center School of Medicine, Mercer University School of Medicine, and most recently NYUSOM, have introduced dedicated pathways that offer selected students the option of obtaining a medical degree in 3 years. In addition, a consortium of six medical schools, comprising Texas Tech, Mercer, Louisiana State University, Indiana University School of Medicine, East Tennessee State University, and the University of Kentucky, are in discussions to develop a 3-year M.D. model.⁴

The first cohort of 16 highly competitive students was admitted into the 3-year pathway at NYUSOM this summer. These students had a mean grade-point average of 3.84 and a mean score of 36.5 on the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT). Four had already earned advanced degrees: 2 Ph.D.s and 2 master's degrees. Participating students will meet

the LCME's minimum requirement of 130 weeks of instruction. Unlike the Texas Tech and Mercer programs, NYUSOM's model is not limited to the training of primary care physicians. Students in the accelerated program have been offered conditional acceptance, at the time of admission to medical school, into a residency program at NYU Langone Medical Center. Interest in this new pathway was high: 50 of the approximately 280 students who were initially offered admission to the medical school in 2013 submitted the required supplemental application for this pathway, indicating interest in 16 different fields, including both medical and surgical specialties. The NYU program also offers an "opt-in" pathway, whereby students can defer the decision about fast tracking and specialty choice until the beginning of year 3, when they can make applications to one of our (or in the future other) graduate medical education (GME) programs.

One benefit of shortened training, whether at the premed, undergraduate medical education (UME), or GME stage, is to help reverse the trend of physician

"age creep." Although shortening UME training alone will not increase the number of graduating physicians, it will allow graduates to enter practice sooner and thereby increase the physician-years in practice on the national level, helping to address the shortage.

The 3-year pathway to the M.D. degree will also enable linkage between UME and GME. Currently, U.S. medical schools with 3-year M.D. programs place graduates in residency programs at their own institutions, engaging students with mentors in the program during their first year of medical school. Such connectivity creates an opportunity to develop longitudinal competency-based assessment models that span the UME–GME continuum, tracking learning and its effect on clinical outcomes. As an increasing number of medical schools adopt a 3-year pathway, residency programs will probably begin accepting fast-tracked students from other programs, perhaps through a consortium, extending the possibility of tracking learner data along the UME–GME continuum across institutions.

Another benefit of a 3-year pathway is its effect on reducing the student debt burden. The economic advantage to the student is not only a 25% reduction in debt, but also an additional year of earnings from entering the workforce earlier. According to the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), in 2011, the mean medical school debt for indebted graduates was \$147,188, with 64% of medical students carrying a debt of \$100,000 or more.⁵ On the 2012 AAMC Medical School Graduation Questionnaire, 50% of graduating medical students reported that their level of educational debt influ-

enced their choice of specialty. Student debt burdens also adversely affect the economic and racial or ethnic diversity of the medical school population, thereby reducing the diversity of the physician workforce.⁵

Concerns about a 3-year pathway include the sense that though the fourth year is often underutilized, it can be a valuable maturation period for many students, providing opportunities for research or additional clinical exposure. Related concerns include the potential loss of exploration and enjoyment in the medical education process. Certainly, careful mentoring and monitoring, beginning at the time of matriculation, as well as the opportunity to opt in or opt out, are essential for the success of any accelerated training program.

Shortening UME training for selected students should be viewed as just one approach to addressing the need for change in the post-Flexnerian era. Shortening brings its own challenges, particularly the need to assess competency in the fast-tracked UME model. Indeed, if medicine shifts away from traditional time-based evaluation, such evaluation must be replaced by competency-based

assessment — ideally, a standardized national assessment model. In the years ahead, developing a uniform set of milestones and competencies whereby assessment cuts across each level of medical school, residency, and fellowship, thus linking UME and GME as a continuum of learning, will be a major task for medical educators.

The need for medical education reform in the post-Flexnerian era is widely recognized. We need to address the ways in which physicians acquire and manage information, utilize technology, and serve the country's needs, while delivering culturally competent care that reduces health disparities. The past three decades have seen a gradual lengthening of the training process, driven by isolated decision making at the individual programmatic level. We are at a point of inflection where a coordinated approach spanning the silos of UME, GME, accrediting organizations, and health care delivery systems is critical. We need to train physicians who are committed to lifelong learning and who are passionate and highly trained care providers, as well as scientists and leaders of a new health care delivery model. Time

spent in training is an important factor in medical instruction, and the process of becoming a physician requires an extended period (premed, UME, and GME) of both learning and practical experiences. We must ensure the value and efficiency of our educational efforts, appreciating the various ways in which trainees at all levels will be able to master the requisites necessary for entering the medical profession and advancing within it.

Disclosure forms provided by the authors are available with the full text of this article at NEJM.org.

An audio interview with Dr. Richard Schwartzstein about 3-year M.D. programs can be heard at NEJM.org.

From NYU Langone Medical Center, New York.

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The 3-Year Medical School — Change or Shortchange?

Stanley Goldfarb, M.D., and Gail Morrison, M.D.

Shortening medical school to 3 years, some observers argue, would increase the supply of physicians — perhaps particularly primary care physicians — and reduce the cost of medical training, without compromising clinical care.¹ Data from many years of experiments in shortening

medical education, however, suggest that doing so is unwise — a conclusion supported by assessments of the readiness of today's medical school graduates to assume increased clinical responsibility as they enter residency programs.² There may be exceptional students capable of accelerated

learning and small programs that create unusual opportunities for such students, but we believe that for the typical student seeking an M.D. degree, the duration of medical school should not be shortened.

There are many examples of past attempts to shorten training

by combining baccalaureate and medical education (B.A.–M.D.) into a 6- or 7-year experience. Western Reserve University made the first attempt in the 1950s. By 2011, some fraction of the entering medical school class at 67 U.S. schools were students pursuing combined B.A.–M.D. degrees; 39% of community-based medical schools and 33% of research-intensive schools had such programs. But among schools offering a B.A.–M.D. program, the proportion that compressed their curriculum into 6 years dropped from 23% in 1990 to 7% in 2011, and the proportion requiring 7 years fell from 32% to 13%. Thus, only 20% of the medical schools that once hoped to abbreviate the duration of B.A.–M.D. education now offer programs shorter than 8 years.³ Moreover, even in these programs, most of the time savings result from reducing the B.A. portion of the curriculum while maintaining a 4-year medical school curriculum. Indeed, the number of schools reducing the duration of the medical school component has declined dramatically. In 1974, a total of 33 schools allowed students to obtain an M.D. degree after 3 years in their curriculum's medical school component,⁴ but such options virtually disappeared from the scene thereafter, only to reappear in 2013 in two nascent programs aiming to produce primary care physicians.

The reasons articulated in 1970 for embarking on a 3-year curriculum were the same as those cited today: to reduce the cost of education and to increase the number of primary care physicians in a country facing an anticipated physician shortage.⁵ The causes of the failure of those 3-year programs are not well documented, but some common

points have emerged. Both students and faculty felt pressured by the compression of material. As many as 25% of students negated the supposed benefits of an accelerated program by voluntarily extending their education by 1 or 2 years. Even as these students were often stigmatized as weak or deficient for failing to complete the program in 3 years, students who were able to complete the program in that time felt "exhausted," having studied in an uninterrupted slog through 34 of the program's 36 months.⁵ Perhaps most important, there was substantial faculty dissatisfaction with the adequacy of the curriculum. The expansion of medical knowledge since that time, combined with a recent trend toward reducing the pre-clinical curriculum to 1.5 years, puts even more pressure on the faculty to provide a comprehensive education and on students to gain required knowledge.

Other aspects of the failed experiment of 40 years ago resonate in the current proposals. The hope that students would opt for primary care careers was not consistently borne out. Students enrolling in some accelerated B.A.–M.D. programs in community-based medical schools tended to enter careers in family medicine in higher numbers than did those from standard M.D. programs, but even those numbers were nowhere near the hoped-for 60 to 75%; and overall, these programs did not consistently boost the number of students choosing primary care careers.

At one time, the fourth year of medical school was spent exclusively in outpatient care settings, but its emphasis has largely shifted to inpatient electives,⁵ through which students seek broad experience in fields in which they

may soon choose a career. Most students spend several months pursuing electives at institutions that rank high among their residency-site choices. They also spend 2 to 3 months interviewing at the hospitals where they would consider pursuing post-graduate training. If the fourth year were eliminated, these activities would need to occur during the third year, further compromising clinical education, or would have to be abandoned. Though some observers argue that these efforts to sort through career options and residency programs lack educational value, they are necessary steps for students who are asked to fund their medical education and are therefore entitled to shape the location and nature of their post-graduate training.

In addition, access to global health experiences; instruction in medical ethics, principles of patient safety, and health policy; and advanced clinical experiences are extremely valuable components of the current fourth year. Moreover, there is a recent trend toward students' seeking even longer terms for medical school, with the opportunity to gain additional credentials, including master's degrees, certificates of added competence, and prolonged research-training experiences. All these activities speak to students' sense of an expanding leadership role for physicians on future health care teams.

In our view, the third year of medical school curricula requires reform, since students currently have inadequate opportunity for the direct patient contact that they need to become independent caregivers. Work-hour regulations apply to students as well as residents, and the current heightened focus on efficiency and

safety can impede students' ability to gain required procedural skills and to develop close relationships with patients. We strongly believe that educators should ensure that each clinical rotation is actually a course in a given discipline rather than simply a 1- or 2-month period of clinical involvement or observation of clinical care. Extensive didactics and the use of new tools for evaluating students' competence in each discipline should be required components of each clinical clerkship. The fourth year, then, should be a time to hone these new clinical skills and narrow down career choices.

Unfortunately, the current fourth year fails to prepare many students for more advanced responsibilities. In a 2009 survey, about one third of residency-program directors representing 10 medical specialties and 21 institutions indicated that interns struggled with the organization of medical knowledge and the application of that knowledge to patient care, professionalism related to assuming responsibility, their fund of medical knowledge, and the ability to work without supervision, among other issues. The researchers concluded that fourth-year students need to "ex-

pand their knowledge in both clinical and non-clinical domains."² Truncating the medical school experience would make it far more difficult to accomplish that goal.

To better prepare students for residency, we believe that more intensive clinical experiences in both outpatient and inpatient settings are needed and that innovative advising and mentoring programs should be created to enhance the transition to residency. Given the growing complexity of medicine, it seems counterproductive to compress the curriculum into 3 years, reducing both preclinical and clinical experiences. The limited opportunity for students to participate meaningfully in patient care during their undergraduate careers is the problem that needs correction; the solution is not to rush students into residency after allowing them even less involvement with patients.

The physician's role on the health care team is evolving. Teams of physicians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, and pharmacists can develop new paradigms for delivering higher-quality clinical care, even with a predicted shortage of primary care physicians. Physicians may

need even more advanced education — in health policy, public health needs, clinical research, and medical ethics — in order to lead such teams. But we believe that, at the very least, physicians will succeed as team leaders only if they first attain all the clinical competencies required by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education. That requires enhancement, not shortening, of medical school.

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