

Shortened training would offer advantages

Physicians could begin practice brimming with ideas—and with less debt

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"They say that we are better educated than our parents' generation. What they mean is that we go to school longer. They are not the same thing."

—Douglas Yates

The president of my university, William Brody, MD, PhD, says we take too long to train the current generation of physicians and biomedical scientists. I agree.

Some will perceive this view as anti-intellectual, but I think we spend years of student-physicians' lives teaching them things they don't need to know and making them do things that will not be germane to their future careers.

Some examples:

- A couple of decades ago, the American Board of Ophthalmology mandated a clinical internship for those, like me, seeking to become board-eligible in ophthalmology. This ruling immediately added a year's time to that needed to become an ophthalmologist in the United States.

No evidence exists that this additional requirement elevated the quality of ophthalmologists practicing in the United States compared with those who came before us. Rather, we learned to use drugs with names primarily of historic interest today to treat diseases we no longer managed once our internships were completed.

- Despite completing the requirements for majors in both biochemistry and chemistry in college, I spent much of the first 2 years of medical school taking additional courses in these subjects. Memorizing the small bones of the hand was a challenge, and I can recall that the trapezium is the small bone supporting the thumb.

Trust me when I tell you that most of what I was taught and required to memorize in medical school has been long forgotten and never used in the practice of my profession.

- I am fortunate enough to travel outside the United States occasionally for professional reasons and have the pleasure and honor of meeting and observing ophthalmologists in their home countries. Every time, the youth of the junior ophthalmologists in those countries impresses me; sometimes they complete their training at an age close to that of my typical first-year resident.

Are these youthful trainees up to American standards? My observation is that many countries outside the United States are producing outstanding clinicians and superb surgeons. My residents, many of whom travel to other countries for elective courses, commonly tell me how impressed they are with the skills of these ophthalmologists.

People involved in designing medical school curricula tell me that they are not trying to teach medical

students to know everything, especially because biomedical science totally changes every few years. Rather, they say, they seek to teach medical students "how to think." But why does it take 4 years to teach a medical student to think? Can't someone who was tops in his or her class in high school and college be taught to think in 3 years?

In many specialties, trainees are finishing their residencies and fellowships in their mid-to-late 30s, especially if they took time to get a PhD along the way. They graduate with an average of \$250,000 in student loans, may be married and have a child or two, and suddenly are worried about paying off their debt, buying a first home, and otherwise providing for their families.

When some of these brilliant young people decide not to pursue academic careers, many academics shake their heads sadly and wonder why.

My view is that we who are doing the training may be sowing the seeds of our own extinction by virtually bankrupting the next generation, making it increasingly not economically viable for most of our graduates to accept the lower incomes of academicians.

Pedagogical scientists may prove that I am wrong and that our current lengthy training programs are appropriate and are producing better physicians than in the past.

But if I were king, we'd shave a few years off the time required for training ophthalmologists in the United States, dramatically cut the debt burden on our trainees, and get them out in the world to start their careers when they are younger and brimming with great ideas.

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