

Elitism in Medicine: How the Pre-Medical Experience Fosters Elitism

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ABSTRACT

Medicine is a profession that requires tremendous academic rigor, research, and dedication. Even in early pre-medical training there are enormous pressures to achieve the highest levels of academic success while also gaining experience in clinical and research settings and while maintaining extracurricular activities that are expected to demonstrate well-roundedness and are often part of the admissions review process for entry into medical school. These factors create barriers, on top of the significant financial ones that are associated with matriculation in advanced academic institutions, that often bar the entry of the socio-economically disadvantaged or students of color. Taken together, these factors self-select for a “private club” mentality among medical and pre-medical students, further limiting diversity and creating an institutional structure that generates an elitist framework.

(Keywords: medicine, pre-medical studies, medical school, elitism, diversity, institutional barriers, power structures)

INTRODUCTION

Medicine has long been a revered practice, an admired profession, and one whose initiation into the career has become known for its tremendous leaps and bounds. The pre-medical experience is a unique educational endeavor that many ambitious students embark upon with the ending goal of becoming physicians and of helping people.

It is characterized by rigorous academic and formal curricular training, valued-participation in informal co-curriculars, the illustrious Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT) in North American countries (Lin, et al., 2013), and an

overall competitive atmosphere that demands much from its applicants.

Very little current research focuses on the pre-medical experience and how it shapes our future physicians (Lin, et al., 2013). Yet, the effects of this unique educational pathway has great significance; empirical evidence has shown that what happens to students prior to medical school and during, affects their performance in school and their performance beyond as they continue into their career (Lin, et al., 2013).

It is critical that we come to understand the consequences of the pre-medical years on the character of our future physicians (Lin, et al., 2013) and how these experiences come to foster a sense of elitism that continues to prevail in medical practice. This is particularly important if we truly hope to one day succeed in complete universal, representative, healthcare.

Medicine as an Elitist Institution

In order to understand why elitism exists in medicine, we look to the pre-medical experience and the barriers that may decrease certain individuals' abilities to succeed and to gain acceptance into medical school. Pre-medical students must strive for academic success and an overall well-rounded background to even be considered competitive for school admissions (Dumke, et al., 2018). Students are required to maintain very high grade-point averages (GPAs), accumulate hours of experience in clinical settings, volunteer, research, shadow, and to still maintain personal hobbies and skills (Dumke, et al., 2018).

The demanding baseline for education, working experience, and personal development is not

possible for many students. Disadvantaged and minority individuals find the pathway entering into the medical field as one filled with barriers. Barriers that include, but are not limited to: financial burden, lacking knowledge of the path to becoming a medical professional, inadequate social support, and lacking the metrics of a competitive candidate (Joseph, et al., 2021).

The cause for the lack of diversity in the medical field is multi-faceted. Oftentimes, those that enter the pre-medical experience and even succeed into and beyond medical school come from primarily middle and upper socioeconomic classes (Joseph, et al., 2021). Moreover, oftentimes these individuals come from families or from communities that already have connections to medical practice.

The effects of socioeconomic status underlies many of the barriers that exist in getting into medical school and enables the institutional bias that exists in regards to race and sex as potential hindrances into pre-medical student success (Joseph, et al., 2021). Students who are unsuccessful in the application process are typically from low socioeconomic classes, are underrepresented in the system, and lack the financial aid to access resources that would otherwise support their education and career. They are often students who are first-generation post-secondary students, immigrants, from less privileged backgrounds; they women, they are people of color, they are those who live with both visible and invisible disabilities, and they are those that lack support, help, and guidance into a field that has long since been “its own private club” (Joseph, et al., 2021).

The resources to overcoming these barriers are also placed behind a “wall” of sorts. Many aspects about medical practice feels like “its own private club”, enforcing a difference, a separation, between those that are “in” and those that are “out”. There is typically a lack of exposure to the medical field and its practices, until well after individuals are in the field and thus reinforces this “club ideology” (Joseph, et al., 2021). With that, the medical system lacks a “passing on the torch” mentality, wherein those already in the field do not typically support those wanting to enter.

Oftentimes, medical practitioners are inaccessible to the aspiring student. Students move blindly through the years, sending unsolicited, cold emails with hopes that someone will have the key

to unlocking this mysterious and private “medical club”. With that it is now critical to reassess the foundational statement of this paper, that “medicine is elite”.

Addressing Medical Elitism

We believe that the practice of medicine is, itself, a noble one and that it is beyond deserving of its esteemed and respected status among society. Despite this, we call into question the intrinsic sense of privilege and the institutional biases and barriers that exist in medicine. We call into question the elitism that makes it difficult for underrepresented, minority, less affluent individuals to emerge from the pre-medical years, successful.

We hope to push for change in the system that systematically allows for those with status, with connections, with economic, sociological, and psychological advantages to continue to dominate the field - easily - and for those that are less advantaged, to attempt to break into the field with great struggle. It is not the pre-medical experience itself that turns “regular” individuals into “elitists”, but rather the structure of the experience that “weeds out” the “regulars” and maintains the “elite”.

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