

Career paths for a young doctor: Stepping outside the clinic

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There are always a few students who are not happy with life in a white coat. They feel they are not cut out for a career in clinical medicine or surgery, and begin exploring other options. We have seen several of our friends facing this dilemma and we were pleasantly surprised when we found that the panel of speakers at the AIIMSONIANS symposium on career options included some who had stepped out of the cocoon that is a hospital.

BIOMEDICAL RESEARCH

For many students, the wards take precedence over research and academia, which they believe to be of secondary importance. However, there are always a few who consider research their ultimate goal and for whom research was the reason why they chose medicine as a career. Some of these students take the initiative to do research work, and pick up a collection of fellowships and awards at the undergraduate level itself. It is perhaps the romantic image of being alone in a laboratory, exploring nature's deepest mysteries, that drives many young people even today to dream of being scientists. Delving into the unknown in the hope of discovering treatments and techniques that can further the boundaries of medicine is definitely something that can fascinate a student.

Dr Subrata Sinha, Head of the Department of Biochemistry at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), is one of those who embraced the path of research. A topper in his MB,BS class at AIIMS, he opted for an MD in biochemistry owing to his deep interest in molecular biology. He said, at the symposium, that since he had always loved biology in school, the decision was easy enough to make when the time came. Speaking of the importance of research, he said we all feed on the 'fruits of research' and in this context, he took the examples of biochemistry, pharmacology and biotechnology. He mentioned imaging and radiology, which are considered clinical fields but which have actually grown out of the work of physicists over decades. After doing a PhD in the UK, where he got acquainted with the latest in molecular biology, Dr Sinha came back to India. He advises students to go abroad at least once to broaden their horizons, even if they plan to pursue research careers in India in the future. While noting that research definitely pays less than clinical practice, he maintained that a good scientist can still get adequate research funding if she/he pursues innovative projects.

With the basic needs of the population being met gradually, the question of keeping people in good health assumes greater importance. This is precisely why medical research is bound to boom in the years to come. Every little thing that can improve the quality of life or result in even a marginal reduction in pain will be explored with missionary zeal. Whether in basic physiology or clinical therapy, research will form the backbone of the medical system.

THE RESEARCH PUSH

Of late, India has realized that its medical institutes will face a shortage of qualified researchers in the next decade. Though the government is pushing to open more engineering and medical institutes, the emphasis on producing quality researchers is missing. However, for those who are qualified to conduct research, the field will be overflowing with opportunity.

Most Indian and foreign scientists believe that research is bound to take off in a big way in India very soon. The National Brain Research Centre in Manesar, Haryana (<http://www.nbr.ac.in/>), a paradise of shiny glass and complicated machinery in the middle of a pristine village area, is a prime example of what the future could hold. The past few years have seen the establishment of several important medical research centres, such as the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biology (<http://www.icgeb.org/>) in New Delhi and the Institute for Genetics and Integrative Biology (<http://igib.res.in/>). These institutes work on international lines and are engaged in cutting-edge research, and the salaries are good.

OTHER OPTIONS IN RESEARCH

In addition, there are always options in companies that conduct clinical trials and in the research arms of major corporations. These are suitable for even clinical physicians who do not want to enter basic research. The Indian pharmaceutical industry appears poised to take on the giants of the drug world and this is definitely a good time to be a person with a background in 'pharma'-related fields. Research also throws up opportunities to become an entrepreneur and set up a small company to meet unsatisfied demand. It may be recalled that the famous Littmann stethoscope company was started by a cardiologist, not by a business mogul!

CIVIL SERVICE

What about fields which are almost completely severed from medicine? Dr Vinod Aggarwal is something that most Indians aspire to be, apart from being a doctor. He is an officer in the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and was once the Health Secretary of Bihar. He emphasized that the civil services give one an opportunity to see the fruits of one's efforts reflected in development. Being in the administration gives one the opportunity to lead and the power to change the status quo. Medicine, according to him, is no longer the beacon for the best and the brightest. Moreover, the long drawn medical courses and the struggle seem futile to many people.

Noting that doctors are usually not meant to be managers, he advised only those students with an administrative bent of mind to consider the civil services as a career. The Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) examination now has a medical paper, although doctor-IAS officers are not given a non-practising allowance. He said that though emoluments in the government services were quite poor earlier on, the situation has improved a

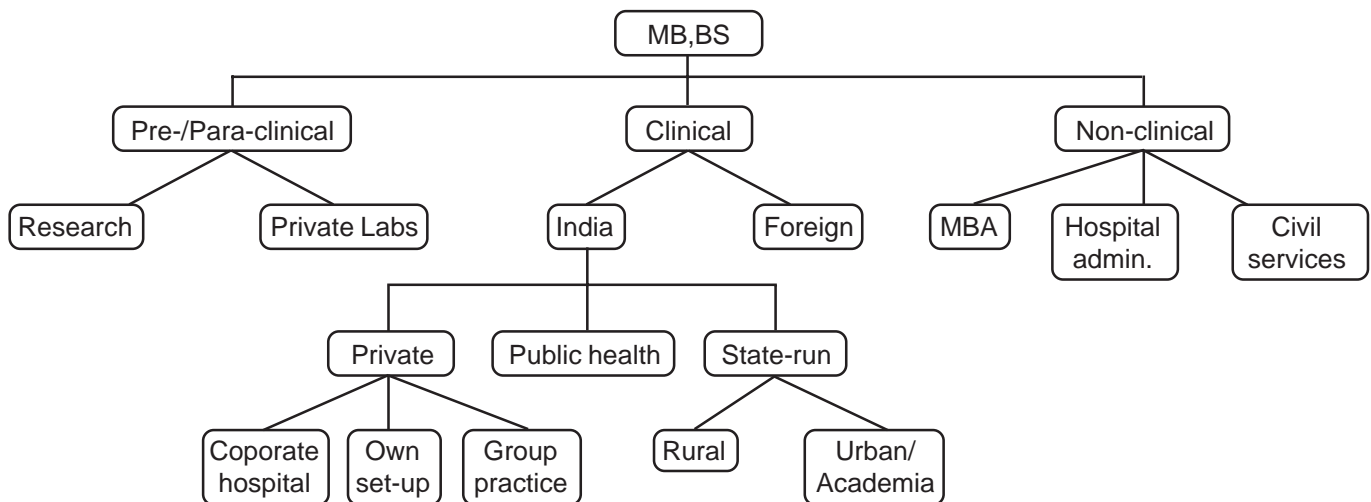


Fig 1. Various career paths available to a doctor — MBA Masters in Business Administration

great deal today. He also noted that civil servants get promoted relatively quickly. However, being in the government services is not always fun and games. Transfers are frequent and sudden, and the constant shifting disrupts one's family life.

MANAGEMENT

The recent talk of recession has punctured the engineer-business administration balloon, but every college still has a handful of Indian Institute of Management (IIM) aspirants, who feel that business suits them best. To appear for the Common Admission Test (CAT) examination, one needs to be at least a graduate, while those who hope to get into one of the ABCs (the IIMs of Ahmedabad, Bangalore or Calcutta) must be among the top 1% or 2% scorers, in addition to having good interview skills and an impressive curriculum vitae. Several aspirants we talked to said that despite the gloomy economic outlook, they considered industry a safe bet as much depends on one's entrepreneurial spirit.

HOSPITAL ADMINISTRATION

Hospital administration is another field that people interested in managerial work can consider. It is a good option for students who wish to keep in touch with the hospital environment without having to work as a clinician. Hospital management is a promising career option, given the current boom in the healthcare sector. Those interested can either do an MBA in hospital administration (much like an MBA in other fields), or a Masters in Hospital Administration from one of the many institutes that offer this degree. These institutes include AIIMS, Christian Medical College, Vellore and Birla Institute of Technology and Science, Pilani. The eligibility criteria may vary from institute to institute, but students from a medical background certainly have an edge over the others since they have a better understanding of what it takes to run a hospital smoothly and efficiently.

Dr Subrata Sinha
Dr Vinod Aggarwal

CONCLUSION

Finally, it has to be said that the best person to tell you what to do after MB,BS is you yourself. When would be the best time to decide? Maybe as soon as you enter college, or maybe only after you graduate. It all depends on when your thoughts begin to crystallize, when you start getting an image of an older you in your mind's eye. How do you see yourself in the future? A rich big city doctor with a flashy car? A scientist in pursuit of the secrets of nature? Maybe an administrator? Or perhaps a village doctor treating the impoverished? The truth is that none of these options is superior or inferior to the others, and it would be unwise on our part to recommend any of them. We have always believed that a person who has entered medicine and has come out on the other side of a gruelling course of five-and-a-half years can do anything he sets his mind on. The choice is yours.

Be completely rational while assessing your career choices, and remember that an important criterion is the question of how much you would like or dislike your job. You know yourself better than anyone else, and all we can say is that you should take some time out to sincerely introspect and decide what you value the most. It could be money, it could be a leisurely lifestyle, it could be academic output, or it could be social service.

Once you have broadly determined what you want in life, the process of decision-making becomes easier. We have given you the essence of what each career choice has to offer, and you can try to see which one best matches your desires. This should help to rid you of your doubts to a great extent. We hope this series serves as a reliable guide for those of you who are plagued by career uncertainty. In conclusion, we would like to thank all the doctors and faculty who have shared their experience and wisdom with us, and we wish you all the best.

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