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### **Should I become and PA or a doctor?**

#### ***What I already know about becoming a PA or a doctor.***

For the past 4 years of my life, I have been telling people I want to become a doctor. When I came to college, I found out that I could step down from my focus for a little bit and explore my options. I knew I wanted to become a general doctor, a person who performs physicals and other regular check-ups. I started to get these weird feelings later, and was scared of the fact that the patient's life would solely be in my hands. Soon enough, I found out that becoming a Physician's Assistant (PA) is also a possibility. Now I am confused because I had found another option. Which one do I chose? What is better for me? I have been stressing about it every day since then, along with maintaining my academic career. I knew this I-Search Essay couldn't have come at a better time. This is was my chance, I couldn't procrastinate and say I would look into the details over the summer because I still have four years.

I do know that doctors have a 4 year medical degree (MD or OD) and have anywhere from 3-10 years of residency. The residency all depends on the kind of doctor I want to be. I know that I want a profession in the health field and want to work with children or families, so a generic doctor that doesn't cut things open and have blood flying everywhere is a good choice for me. Doctors are licensed to write prescriptions and perform surgeries.

PA's on the other hand, have a different requirement. It usually differs from state to state, but the norm is a two year program after an undergraduate school. Since the medical industry is

growing, there will be more demand for PA's very soon. Even though they don't have the authority to practice on their own in some states, they are basically the doctor's right arm. PA's work very closely with doctors and help them with every aspect of medicine. They are allowed to write prescriptions under the doctor's license but can't perform surgery on their own.

Basically a physician assistant does anything the supervising doctor allows them to do, keeping in mind the law. They are also not the ones to be independently responsible for a patient's life, whereas doctors practice their medicine independently.

### ***Why I Want to Answer this Question***

For the past four years of my life, everyone has been asking me what I wanted to do with my life. I always said I wanted to become a pediatrician or a family physician. Every time I said that, everyone would look at me in amazement and applaud my focus and integrity. I have had times where the amount of education to become a doctor has scared me half to death, but I have stuck by my decision to go to medical school and receive my PhD.

After I came to college in the fall of 2009, I started exploring my options and talking to my advisor about my future. She told me that there were many things I could do with a biology major and handed me some papers with different occupations with the amount of courses and requirements I need to accomplish if I were to pursue a career in any one of those fields. Sherry Nuss, my advisor, informed me of all the clubs on campus that I could join to receive even more information in that area. I decided that I would join the Pre-Med club, Pre-PT club and the Pre-PA club. I very quickly found out that physical therapy was not for me, so I had narrowed it down to two.

I was debating the amount of education and the amount of responsibility that comes with both occupations. Thinking of having someone's life solely in my hands scared me. I also knew that I wanted a family and wanted to be around for my children when they grew up, just like my mother was there for my brother and me. In both occupations I was going to have to make some sacrifices. If I were to become a doctor, I would have to take 4 years of undergraduate, 4 years of medical school, and 2-3 years of residency which make me 27 or 28 years old when I would finally have a job. On the other hand, if I were to become a PA, I would be done with my education at the age of 24 and would have a job after that. The amount of education and the time I have to put forth is what is scaring me, which is why I am debating if I should get myself a PhD or stick with being a PA. The difference is two years and this decision affects the rest of my life.

### ***Story of the Search***

I began my research in my advisor's office. I drew a line down the center of a piece of paper and started writing pros and cons about being a doctor and on a different sheet of paper I did the same for a physician assistant. I set them both next to one another and looked at both of them. From what I knew, I found out that the main difference between these two careers was the salary, hours and dependence. Apparently that answer just wasn't good enough for me, so I looked into both the careers.

Next, I knew I had to find out about each one of them individually. I started out with the higher position, a doctor. Being a doctor is a very rewarding position but it requires a lot of learning even after you have your degree. My brain will just get bigger and bigger because I will have to keep up with all the new medical findings. Hopefully it doesn't explode or make me look like Jimmy Neutron.

I found an article by the British Medical Association stating the basics. It said that doctors help citizens become healthier, prescribe medicine and perform tests to see what is wrong. It was very reassuring to know that pursuing a career as a doctor guarantees me a job. The article also mentioned the 4 years of medical school and 2-8 years of residency depending on the type of doctor. I kept reading further and I found something a little shocking. I have always been told that doctors have fixed hours if they perform basic practice and are on call maybe once every 2-3 months. According to the British Medical Association, I found out that most doctors work 60 hours a week. Seeing this number kind of scared me, but then I quickly realized that if you become a doctor in a rural area or a small clinic, you have more breaks and fewer hours, therefore I won't have too much to sacrifice when I have family in the future. There is a higher chance of me having a secure job with this career than any other job because the medical field is the most secure worldwide, no matter what happens to the economy.

The second career I was thinking about was Physician Assistant. PA's have to complete a four year bachelor degree and in addition they also have to have prior experience as a registered nurse, EMT, or paramedic. This all needs to be completed before entering into PA school to show experience. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, PA's learn what doctors do in medical school in half the time. The job of a Physician Assistant is to practice medicine under the supervision of surgeons or physicians. The regular hours are 40 per week in a clinical setting. PA's aren't usually the dominant role in a clinical setting which allows them to stay out issues with the law. This career allows me to move from area of medicine to another without going back to college. It allows me to make my life more diverse and also allows me to have a family with only working eight hours a day.

For the next phase of my research I decided to call up my pediatrician. I picked up my cell phone to call my old doctor's office. The receptionist picked up and I asked to talk to Doctor Schreck, one of the pediatricians. First she asked why I wanted to talk to the doctor, and I told her I needed to ask her some questions for a class. I also mentioned that I was Hana Sayeed's friend. Since the main doctor at this clinic is one of my friend's grandfather, she knew who I was. Luckily at that time, Dr. Schreck did not have any appointments. The receptionist transferred me over to the doctor's office and Dr. Schreck knew who I was right away because she had examined me many times when I was younger. We started talking about college and then I asked her if she had time to answer a few questions about being a doctor. She told me she had some time for me. I asked her to explain to me what the steps were to becoming a doctor.

Well, you know the basics. You have to complete an undergraduate school of course and get your bachelors degree, medical school and residency. Also, to become any form of doctor you have to complete an internship. I don't really know the exact requirement for your MCATs, but I do know that if you score in the top 30% you have a very high chance of receiving admission to the medical school of your choice. Also of course, your college GPA should be around 3.7 or 3.8. I know all of this sound overwhelming, but trust me it's all worth it in the end.

I was dead silent at the other end of the line; Dr. Schreck knew she had startled me a little. Even though I already knew most of this information, the MCAT score is what threw me off guard. A few seconds later I asked her in a shaky voice, "How did choosing this profession affect her family raising abilities?" Dr Schreck chuckled a little and said, "It all started later than I wanted to but now I have new born and a great husband. Take any profession in the health field, you will have to have make some sacrifices that really aren't your favorite but everything will work in

your favor in the end. In my case, since I am a pediatrician, I can take care of my child better and I won't have to pay as many co-pays." We both laughed a little and I thanked her for her time. She mentioned that if I were to ever need another reassurance about this field, I could come job shadow her over one of my breaks. The interview ended, and I realized that I actually knew a lot more about being a pediatrician than I thought. I thought about the offer she had given me and I took her up on it very quickly. Over spring break 2010, I job shadowed her around the office. As she saw patients throughout the day, she let me come in as she talked to them. The only thing I was told was to keep everything I heard confidential. After following her around that day, I felt at ease. I knew that this was a good option for me. It is not as stressful and difficult as I made it to be, but yes to get to this position it takes a lot of courage.

My next step to this research was the internet, oh Google! I went to the site that all my peers love and the teachers hate...Wikipedia. Trust me; I would never cite this website, just using it as a reference to cover all my bases. I scrolled down to the bottom of the page and found a credible article from CNN money magazine. It is called "50 Best Jobs in America." After reading the article, I find that Physicians Assistance is #5 on the list. I learned that is job pays a good amount, and there are flexible hours. The maximum a PA works is 35-40 hours per week. The great thing is that after becoming a PA, I have the option to switch within the medical fields.

Many doctors have the hassle of filling out the paper work, whereas PA's just hop beyond that and stick to caring for the patients. They perform the physical exams, order for lab test and some are even able to prescribe medications for the illnesses patients come into the clinic with. Just as PA Lawrence Herman in CNN magazine said, "We can focus on medicine and spend time with patients. To shake the hand of someone who was nearly dead or cure someone of an illness, there is no feeling like that in the world." Because of all the elderly people

in this world, there is an increase in demand for PA's. Also, it is one of the most secure professions, even if there is very little room for advancement.

My last step was to understand an idea of how a PA and a doctor work together. I attended a lecture given by Dr. Richard Naylor, an orthopedic surgeon and his PA Christy Hulschizer. They both came to talk to the Pre-PA and Pre-Med club at UNI. Christy said that she enjoys her job, but yes she does have to make some sacrifices with her family life due to the medical field she is in. "My children tell me that I spend more time at work than I do at home. I bet you Dr. Richard sees my face more than my husband does." I asked her if this was always going to be the case and she told me that if I were to become a PA for a surgeon that that is what life will be like, other practices not so much. She also said that the only way you are going to like your job is if you like the environment and get along with your doctor. No matter how hard you study and ace the CAPSA, the relationships you build will be the reason you want to go to work and help you learn how to love your job.

Dr. Richard mentioned that you didn't have to be a straight A student to get into medical school. "It is the amount of work and effort you put into what you are doing. If you work for quantity rather than quality, then it will be harder for you to accomplish, understand and practice in the medical field." One of the students at this meeting asked Dr. Naylor about what his family life was like with having this occupation. "There are many days that I work over 12 hours, but no less than 10. I have a great family, but sometimes I do not get to spend as much time as I wish to with them because of my specialty. I would never say I regret becoming an orthopedic surgeon, but I would say that it does take up most of my life." The questions went on and he mentioned that he let Christy to do a majority of his patients on her own. He would see a patient if Christy

needed a second opinion on the diagnosis or if they were just about to go into surgery. “Christy is my right hand, if I didn’t have her, I wouldn’t know what I would do.”

### ***What I Learned***

What a search! I feel like I have confirmed what I already know which puts me at a lower stress level than before. I learned that the main difference between a PA and doctor is the title and salary, not the independence or the amount of time you work with a patient. There are many PA that work by themselves and have the lead doctor stop by the clinic every two months. Doctors have the higher authority because they have their PhD, whereas PA does not. Also a PA is never on call. Becoming a doctor provides me a higher job security than PA, but it’s not like they are going to kick me out if I become a PA because the health care field just keeps growing day by day.

Job shadowing Dr. Schreck helped me understand what a physician truly does. She opened herself up for a million of my questions and helped me sort out what kind of a doctor/person I will be when I deal with patients. She talked me through the process of becoming a doctor and explained to me in detail what the steps to medical school were. Dr. Schreck told me about the sacrifices I may have to make if I already have a family started before I receive my degree and begin practicing on my own.

After hearing both Dr. Naylor and his PA Christy talk about their occupations in the same environment, I learned that there is not much of a difference in these two occupations. They both mentioned that they both do the same amount of work, but Christy has more hands on time with the patients. I think that is what I want more off rather than filling out a lot of paper work. Dr. Naylor spends a lot of time in surgery and has long hours, but he still has one on one with



patients. He mentioned that having a certain grade point isn't going to get me anywhere. I have to be very diverse for medical schools to like me. They can't tell what kind of a person I am if I just show my academic side. On paper, I have to show well rounded I am.

Overall, work wise, there is no difference. It is simply the complexity of the steps to reach either one of those positions. Both of these occupations require a lot of reading after receiving the degree. This is obvious because the health field keeps growing and people in this field of profession should keep up with all of its advances. It is merely what I want. Do I want to be the leader or the follower? To this day I am still debating, but after doing this paper I know a lot more about each occupation.

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