

Philosophy and Medicine¹

The Philosopher Doctor

Many people who are interested in going on to careers in medicine find philosophy classes truly rewarding, and there are good reasons why. Many of the skills and tendencies emphasized are similar - for instance:

- engaging in diagnosis (of situations, arguments, or positions)
- thinking clearly and with organization
- discerning and evaluating evidence
- creative thinking; the ability to imagine alternative scenarios
- logic, induction, deduction
- inference to the best explanation
- articulating thoughts concisely, precisely and without ambiguity
- being attuned to the importance of people, their rights and welfare.

The Association of American Medical Colleges says:

Entrance requirements at most medical schools include completion of course work in biology, mathematics, chemistry, physics, and English. But keep your undergraduate experience well rounded by also studying humanities and the social sciences. The ideal physician understands how society works and can communicate and write well."

"It should be strongly emphasized that a science major is not a prerequisite for medical school, and students should not major in science simply because they believe this will increase their chances for acceptance....For most physicians...the undergraduate years are the last available opportunity to pursue in depth a non-science subject of interest, and all who hope to practice medicine should bear this in mind when selecting an undergraduate major."

Philosophy Majors Have the SECOND Acceptance Rate to Medical School

It's true that few pre-med students choose to major in philosophy. The Medical School Admissions Requirements (MSAR) book for 2000-2001 shows that only 0.5% of medical school applicants were Philosophy Majors in 1998. However, 50.2% of these were accepted, which is the second highest rate (just behind History at 52.7% - Biology majors were a mere 39.9%). In the previous year, the acceptance rate for Philosophy majors was the highest of all at 53%!²

Particular Courses of Interest

*Biomedical Ethics * Ethics * Logic (good MCAT prep) * Philosophy of Science * Life and Death * Applied Ethics*

In these courses, students learn about philosophical theories that underlie medical practice, research, and values. We believe that for medical professionals these issues are paramount. It is hard to think of many fields in which moral considerations come up as much as in medicine, and yet many in medicine lack the tools to deal confidently and thoughtfully with ethical situations. Similarly, many medical professionals lack a grounding in the views that ground medical policy: the respect for autonomy that leads us to allow refusal of treatment, or the sense of rights that keeps us from harvesting organs from unwilling live donors. Similarly, theoretical issues form the basis for our ideas about the scientific method, scientific progress, the knowledge we gain from medicine, and other issues explored in the Philosophy of Science.

The following are some questions related to medicine that might be studied in philosophy classes:

- Is there a right to die? A right to be helped to die?
- When is it right to make a decision on someone else's behalf, "for that person's own good"?
- Is there a way to validate/justify the scientific method?
- Are beliefs based on empirical observation the only kind of beliefs that can be known/justified?
- How should doctors understand the human body and it's relation to the mind?
- What do terms like "health" and "harm" mean?
- What rules govern right and wrong conduct?
- What does it take to merit moral consideration - being a person? A potential person? A human? Having feelings?

1 The contents of this document are from http://www.kzoo.edu/phil/choosing_premed.html

2 <http://www.clemson.edu/caah/philosophy/website/html/premed.html>...Of course, competition is fierce among biology majors, so these numbers could be deceptive, but the point is that you needn't write off the possibility of majoring in philosophy if that's what you truly want to do.