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M.D./Ph.D. News

PENN STATE MILTON S. HERSHEY MEDICAL CENTER • PENN STATE COLLEGE OF MEDICINE

Alumni Spotlight

Stacey Clardy is currently a PGY-3 neurology resident at Penn State Hershey. She answers some questions from a current student in the M.D./Ph.D. program.

How did you decide on your residency? What role did your research interest play in your residency selection?

In terms of specialty, like many things in life, neurology found me, not the other way around. I pursued the clinical years of medical school with an open mind, realizing it would be the only opportunity I had to gain exposure to many of the fields. At the end of the year, I realized neurology was the only rotation where I was so excited each day that I woke up before my alarm clock.

In terms of choosing an actual neurology program, I knew that I wanted to incorporate a research year into my clinical training. At the time, that was less commonly accepted than it is now (it is now endorsed and encouraged as an official residency track by the American Academy of Neurology). My top residency choices became those programs that could offer the flexibility to pursue a research year and could also provide support during that time, with the latter being especially tricky since such support must be obtained by an institution outside the traditional funding methods utilized for residents. Additionally, my husband and I preferred a place where we could enjoy the outdoors and avoid long commutes. As you can imagine, only a few places in the country met all of these criteria. In the end, I felt the neurology department here at Hershey was unquestionably the most supportive of its trainees in general, and specifically of my goals, and that philosophy made the decision very easy.

You've started a family during residency. Do you believe your physician scientist career path has made it easier or more difficult to develop a balanced life compared to doing research or medicine alone?

In any career, I think there is always a struggle to balance family with career goals. Certainly the training is longer for a dual degree program than either alone, and so I think we as M.D./Ph.D.s have to be careful not to "put off" our plans for building a family indefinitely. I think one of the benefits of M.D./Ph.D. training is that we are forced to learn balance early on in our career, because we always want to have one foot in each door — while doing clinical training, we miss research, and vice versa.

Stacey Clardy

Ultimately, it is about priorities. At the end of the day, contributing to society through your career is tremendously important, but family and relationships are the stuff of life, and I don't think we talk openly enough about this. There is never a perfect time to start or build your family, and if you worry too much about the impact raising children may have on your career, you will probably never find time to do it.

What advice do you have about choosing a research mentor? Are there important M.D./Ph.D. issues that most graduate students wouldn't need to consider?

It is obviously important that the research is interesting to you and compatible with your career goals. Beyond that, the best advice I ever received was this: If at all possible, make sure that you choose a mentor that you respect and view as a good person in all aspects of life.

What should applicants do to make the most of their dual degree?

The dual degree lends itself to tremendous career options. The path to completing the degrees helps one learn to use it effectively, in that the training demands creativity, patience, flexibility and most importantly, unwavering determination (especially around year 5 in the program, when you have invested a tremendous amount of time and energy, but still don't have either degree!). It is important to effectively communicate your goals to mentors and prospective employers in your career development, as they often differ from the traditional routes pursued by clinicians and/or researchers.

What do you know after moving on from the program that you wish you had known sooner?

The program is best viewed as a journey—less like a sprint, more like a marathon—and because the program is so long in duration, it is unrealistic to expect that there will not be any bumps in the road—whether it be personal or family illness, difficulty with a particular class or experiment, or even the stress of a PI changing institutions. Try to keep a larger perspective on the small challenges, and if and when these challenges come up for you or your colleagues, do not underestimate the importance of supporting each other—your M.D./ Ph.D. classmates are invaluable, and are often your best allies during your years in the program.

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