

CAREERS IN

EMERGENCY MEDICINE





One of the first questions emergency physicians are asked by students is whether working in an emergency department is similar to its portrayal on the television show “ER.” While most emergency physicians would answer, “not exactly,” they do concede that some of the drama is real.

A day or night on the job for an emergency physician might bring joy from delivering a baby or sorrow from consoling a family that has just lost a loved one. It also might require comforting a teenager following a suicide attempt or gently confronting a woman about whether her bruises were caused by spousal abuse.

An emergency physician may suture a deep cut on a child and then be pulled away to do chest compressions on an elderly woman whose heart has stopped beating. This fast-paced job can be intense and emotionally charged, but also very rewarding, especially when a life is saved.

Emergency physicians serve as the nation’s health care safety net. They are governed by a code of ethics that supports emergency medical care as a fundamental right for people from all walks of life: rich or poor, young or old, and insured or uninsured. Their ethical code is supported by a federal law known as the Emergency Medical Treatment and Labor Act (EMTALA) that requires hospital emergency departments to provide care to all patients, regardless of their ability to pay. This responsibility puts emergency physicians in the role of “patient advocates” striving to obtain the best care for their patients who may have no where else to turn in a time of crisis.

Where Do Emergency Physicians Work?

Emergency physicians provide care to 114 million patients annually in more than 4,000 hospital emergency departments nationwide. It is the place people go when they need medical attention immediately. Open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, emergency departments have around-the-clock coverage by physicians and nurses. To provide this coverage, these medical professionals do not have office hours, but work in shifts: mornings, afternoons, and nights. Although emergency physicians may work on weekends and holidays, they often do not have to be “on-call” like many other medical specialists.

Emergency physicians also can choose among a variety of hospitals in which to work—from small community hospitals to large academic medical centers, which may be located in rural, suburban or urban areas, and receive public or private funding. Those who work in academic medical centers often hold faculty positions and teach emergency medicine residents and other medical students. They also are

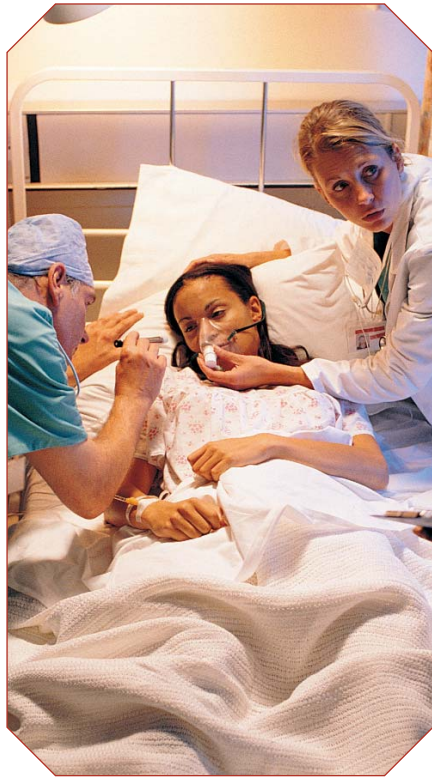
involved in conducting research, as well as providing medical care to patients.

Emergency physicians have training and experience that span multiple disciplines and medical specialties, which means they are able to work in a variety of fields. Most work in hospital emergency departments, but some work in other settings.



For example, emergency physicians work for cruise lines as ship physicians. They may be employed by the military to provide medical care to soldiers on battlefields. They also may work in local communities to develop disaster plans, because of their expertise in disaster medicine and managing mass casualties. Others may be on the sidelines at football games providing sports medicine to athletes.





Emergency physicians with special expertise in toxicology may work in poison control centers. Those who have focused their training on prehospital care may be employed as medical directors for emergency medical services (EMS) systems.

With such a vast number of career opportunities available, it may be daunting to decide which path to pursue, but these decisions do not need to be made until later in medical school or during residency training.

In high school or in college, it is important to decide whether a career in medicine is right for you. To help make this decision, it might be helpful to get

some first-hand experience to see what it is like to be a physician. Many doctors allow students to observe them in their practices. These experiences can help students learn whether they enjoy working with the sick and injured, and, for example, can tolerate the sight of blood.

What Kind of Education Do You Need To Become an Emergency Physician?

Being an emergency physician involves a lifetime of learning. It begins with four years of college, four years of medical school, and three to four years of residency training. But their education doesn't end here. Emergency physicians are required to earn continuing medical education credits (usually 50 hours a year) throughout their careers to keep their medical licenses.

However, the first step in becoming a physician is achieving good grades in high school and college. In college, students should ask an academic advisor which courses are required to get into medical school. These courses also will help prepare students for the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT), a standardized test administered by the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) and required by most medical schools.

MD or DO

Applicants for medical school can choose between two types of medical training: allopathic and osteopathic. Allopathic medical schools are traditional medical schools



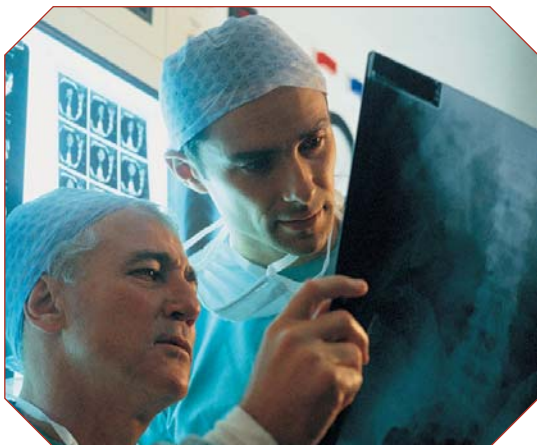
where graduates earn a Medical Degree (MD). Osteopathic school graduates earn a Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine (DO) degree. These schools are very similar, except that osteopathic schools have additional courses in Osteopathic Manipulative Treatment (OMT). To learn more about osteopathic medicine, visit the American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine at www.aacom.org.

Internship and Residency

Today, for emergency physicians to receive board certification they must complete an emergency medicine residency program at an accredited teaching hospital. The Emergency Medicine Residents' Association (www.emra.org) provides information to help medical students evaluate emergency medicine residency programs.

These programs are three or four years in length, during which residents care for patients under the supervision of

physician faculty and participate in educational and research activities. When physicians graduate from residency programs, they are eligible to take their board certification examinations and begin practicing independently.



Fellowships

Following a residency program, physicians who want to pursue additional specialized training often seek fellowships. Fellowship programs are usually one or two years in length and can be accredited or nonac-



credited. Accredited fellowships provide the necessary training for physicians to receive board certification in a subspecialty like Pediatric Emergency Medicine. The Society for Academic Emergency Medicine (SAEM) has a list of nonaccredited and accredited fellowship programs at www.saem.org/services/fellowsh.htm.

What Does It Mean To Be Board Certified?

Board certification means the physician has successfully completed an approved training program and a national, extensive, certification exam assessing his or her ability to provide quality patient care in the specialty.

Today, there are about 20,000 emergency physicians who are board certified in emergency medicine, which means they received advanced training in quickly recognizing, evaluating, stabilizing and treating the emergency symptoms of all medical and traumatic conditions. Emergency medicine is a nationally recognized specialty, just like pediatrics, surgery, or any other specialty accredited by the American Board of Medical Specialties® (www.abms.org).

Is the Field of Emergency Medicine Growing?

The American Medical Association and the American Board of Medical Specialties® officially recognized emergency medicine as the 23rd medical specialty in 1979. Compared with other medical specialties, it is relatively young.

Only a few decades ago, when a person had a medical emergency, the hospital provided care in inadequately equipped emergency “rooms” staffed by “interns,” residents or on-call physicians. Times have changed and today’s emergency rooms have evolved into full emergency departments, equipped with state-of-the-art diagnostic equipment and staffed by highly trained emergency medicine specialists, physician assistants, and emergency nurses.

In the past decade, the number of patients who sought care at the nation’s emergency departments increased 20 percent. With the number of patient visits rising, so is the demand for physicians to staff emergency departments. There are an estimated 32,000 emergency physicians in the United States; nearly two-thirds are board certified in emergency medicine.

The competition among hospitals for board-certified emergency physicians may explain why incomes in emergency medicine are climbing steadily. Emergency physicians’ salaries are increasing by about 9 percent annually. National salary levels in 2004 ranged between \$140,000 to \$180,000. However, compensation varies from region to region and position to position.

While working conditions in emergency departments are becoming even more demanding because of overcrowded conditions and a growing medical liability crisis caused by a broken liability system, emergency physicians still report the job is very gratifying.

How Can I Learn More About Emergency Medicine?

For more information about emergency medicine, go to the American College of Emergency Physicians’ Web site at www.acep.org or the Emergency Medicine Residents’ Association’s Web site at www.emra.org. The Society for Academic Emergency Medicine also offers many resources to emergency medicine residents, which can be found at www.saem.org/advisor.

