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[\(Stories/2013/story1-0620.html\)](#) [\(Stories/2013/story1-0620.html\)](#)

Best of Both Worlds: Promoting the MD/MBA Degree

By Tiffani Sherman

Physicians are used to being at the top of hospital hierarchy.

“We wear the longest white coats in the hospital and that means we’re in charge,” said Maria Chandler, a pediatrician from Irvine, CA.



Mario Chandler, MD, MBA

Most people respect a physician's decision about how to provide clinical care. But when it comes to the business side of running a hospital, it's a different story. An experience with administrators at a hospital committee meeting changed Chandler's outlook about her future. She may have had the medical training, but they had the business skills.

"They look at physicians as important for getting clinical input and that's it," she said.

Chandler knew she needed to make a change if she wanted to advance as a physician leader. So two years after completing her residency at the University of California- Irvine, Chandler enrolled part-time in the business school at nearby Pepperdine University's Graziadio School of Business. The MBA program took her four years to complete. She finished in 1998.

"The best thing it did for me is give me insight into my own leadership style," she said, "I learned what my strengths and weaknesses were as a leader and I could work on them."

Today, Chandler is helping other young physicians gain their own insight on leadership. In addition to launching the MD/MBA joint degree program at UC-Irvine back in 1997 while still completing her own MBA, Chandler is also the president of the Association of MD-MBA Programs, which was formed in 2003 and incorporated as a non-profit in 2008.

The association's mission is twofold: "To improve the coordination and advancement of leadership and management training and medical education that will equip physicians for leadership positions and to provide an educational home and forum for MD/MBA joint degree programs, serving as a source of information and expertise to universities, programs, students, graduates, residents, fellows, health care professionals and the public."

"Our association mission is to help support programs in any way we can," Chandler said. "It's still very grassroots."

When Chandler launched the association, most medical schools did not teach business skills, nor was it convenient for medical students to find business training on their own. Some of that is changing. More than half of all medical schools in the United States now offer dual degree programs in medicine and business.

Most MD/MBA programs pack four years of medical training and two years of business training into an intense five-year program. The medical portion comes first, with three years of classroom training and clinical rotations. Then, joint degree students take a year to go to business school with other MBA candidates.

After a year dedicated to business training, the joint degree students complete their last year of school with both medical and business classes and activities.

Chandler says the transition to business school from medical school can be a little jarring in terms of teaching style. In medical school, students attend lectures and there is a definite right and wrong way of doing things. Business school is all about learning to function as a team and find new approaches to problems.

In business school, Chandler learned how to negotiate contracts, manage people, lead a practice and work as a team. "Those are skills I personally think every doctor needs," she said. "Medicine is a business and if physicians want to be leaders, they need business training."

As the MD/MBA Association grows, so does interest from prospective doctors. Today, between 200 and 500 students graduate each year with a joint degree. "Soon we will have thousands of highly skilled physician leaders," Chandler said, but not nearly enough spaces to handle the demand for both degrees. "I would like to have enough medical schools to have enough slots for all the students who want to do it."

Students often hear about the dual degree programs while still completing their undergraduate educations and it influences where they apply for medical school. As medical costs continue to increase, more physicians are recognizing the need to learn how to manage a budget without sacrificing patient care, Chandler said.

She tells a story about one MD/MBA student who dramatically reduced costs in his radiology department simply by changing the traffic pattern staff used to move patients through the department. It was taking too much time to get a patient from a room to an X-ray machine, reducing productivity. Changing the pattern reduced the time between patients, allowing more patients to have X-rays, thereby increasing the expensive machine's productivity. Chandler said the change wouldn't have happened if the student didn't have training in both business and medicine.

But joint degrees aren't for everyone. Chandler said the rigorous program is mainly for people who want to be physician leaders. But all physicians could benefit from a better understanding of business principles, she added.

"I can look at problems whether they are clinical or monetary and assess them and come up with the best solutions to serving patients," she said. "I think that the business skills have helped me immensely."

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