

Academic Health Centers

Physicians undergo long and rigorous training before being allowed to practice medicine. Part of this **medical education** involves direct treatment of patients under the supervision of experienced physicians, especially at **teaching hospitals**—hospitals that are affiliated with medical schools and serve as “classrooms” for physicians, nurses, and other health care workers in training. At teaching hospitals, treatment plans are approved by an experienced physician and patients have the advantage of being cared for by a team of doctors, students, and nurses. The September 1, 2004, issue of *JAMA* is a theme issue on medical education. This Patient Page is adapted from one originally published in the September 5, 2001, *JAMA* medical education theme issue.



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Teaching hospitals often are part of **academic health centers** (AHCs), which also may include medical and nursing schools, clinics, emergency departments, freestanding outpatient care centers, hospices, and individual and group practices staffed by a mix of senior physicians and medical personnel in training. In addition to medical education, they provide

- **Research**—Academic health centers perform many kinds of health-related research. This research has led to new ways of preventing, diagnosing, and treating illnesses that affect millions of adults and children. Research facilities also contribute to local economies by providing high-paying, skilled jobs.
- **Care for the underserved**—More than half of the people admitted to AHCs are patients covered under Medicaid or people with little or no access to health care and often no medical insurance, such as migrants, immigrants, battered women, and uninsured children. Without AHCs, providing care for medically underserved patients would be difficult or would not occur.
- **Specialized treatment**—Patients who obtain treatment in AHCs often have severe and rare medical conditions. The staff at AHCs often are expert in treating complicated illnesses and performing complex surgeries and other medical procedures.
- **Community service**—Academic health centers provide community health clinics, health advocacy, health fairs (including screening for diabetes or other diseases, vision testing, and blood pressure testing), vaccinations, and other preventive services.

Academic health centers are essential for educating physicians and other medical staff and for providing first-rate health care and medical research in the United States.

Lise M. Stevens, MS, Writer

Cassio Lynn, MA, Illustrator

Richard M. Glass, MD, Editor

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To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page link on *JAMA*'s Web site at www.jama.com. A Patient Page on medical education was published in the September 6, 2000, issue; one on continuing medical education was published in the September 4, 2002, issue; and one on medical specialties was published in the September 3, 2003, issue.

Sources: American Board of Medical Specialties, American Hospital Association, American Medical Association, Association of American Medical Colleges, The Commonwealth Fund

