

Why Emergency Medicine?

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Why Emergency Medicine?

12 Reasons Why Students Pursue a Career in Emergency Medicine

In a survey of nearly 400 emergency medicine residency applicants, researchers sought to determine the factors that motivated applicants to pursue a career in emergency medicine. The motivating factors are listed below in descending order of importance.

1 Diversity in clinical pathology. “The degree of diversity in clinical pathology is nearly unique to EM, and this was the most important motivating factor for students in our survey,” wrote the authors. “Emergency physicians (EPs) care for patients of all ages and backgrounds and deal with life-threatening, acute and chronic problems relating to all organ systems. The scope of practice in EM is also diverse, depending on the practice setting (e.g., rural, tertiary) and the availability of specialty back-up, follow-up care and hospital equipment.”

2 Emphasis on acute care was ranked second in importance. The authors wrote that “EM encompasses procedural, interventional and diagnostic clinical medicine in dealing with the onset of new illness, the initial manifestation of injury and the acute manifestation of chronic illness.”

3 Flexibility in choice of practice location

4 Flexibility of EM work schedules

5 Previous work experience in EM

6 Greater availability of EM faculty for bedside teaching

7 Strong influence of an EM faculty advisor or mentor

8 Relatively shorter length of training

9 Better salaries for EM than for primary care specialties

10 Presence of EM residency at the student’s medical school

11 Perception that EM residents have more time to moonlight

12 Popularity of EM among medical students

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28 Emergency Medicine Physicians Offer Reasons Why They Chose to Enter the Specialty

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"I like those high-pressure situations," he says. "I like having to think on your feet. It's intellectually challenging, having to know a lot about a lot of things. You realize that your capacity to intervene in a meaningful way is very high." He cites his previous night's shift (and the fact that it is, indeed, shift work, is a purely practical part of its appeal): "I went from seeing someone with an eyelid laceration from playing basketball to a patient with pneumonia to a patient with chest pain to a patient with a miscarriage to a patient with multiple trauma to a patient having a heart attack."¹

William Barsan, MD

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I am often asked the question "Why did you decide to go into Emergency Medicine?" and the answers are numerous. I could simply respond by telling the individual to go watch a few episodes of ER. While that show is pretty accurate, it has just a bit too much Hollywood in it. It is a field that is full of excitement. It truly is a constant adrenaline rush. Life and death decisions are made at the bedside literally in seconds in many patients and this truly is a powerful and humbling experience at the same time. Our field covers an amazing breadth of medicine. Almost every journal in any specialty will have some article that is useful to an emergency physician. Perhaps you have heard the phrase regarding an emergency physician, "jack of all trades, master of none". It is true to an extent, however we believe we are masters at resuscitation and acute care medicine. Aside from a challenging work arena, emergency medicine allows for an active social life outside of medicine. This is a big reason why many people choose Emergency Medicine.²

Sorabh Khandelwal, MD
Department of Emergency Medicine
The Ohio State University

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Going through all the different rotations, I very much had a clinical bent—I liked seeing patients. In my medical school, you started seeing patients your first year, so I gained a lot of clinical experience and loved it. Going through all the third-year rotations, they were all pretty neat. But what I liked the best was when you were in the emergency department in the wee hours of the night—seeing people, taking them to the OR, taking them up to L&D and delivering, or doing procedures—it all started in the emergency department. That was the most exciting part of my rotations.³

Nick Jouriles, MD FACEP, Immediate Past President of the American College of Emergency Physicians

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I actually started out in urology but always loved working in the emergency department. Emergency medicine is a microcosm of society in that we see all the medical problems and ills you see in modern society: obesity, teen pregnancy, drug abuse, mental health issues, domestic violence. You get to effect change one patient at a time, and that has always been more appealing to me. I felt that in the ER I was doing more for the greater good.⁴

Leigh Vinocur, MD

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First of all, it was a new field, and I was interested in academics. I thought because it was new, it might be an opportunity for me to pursue academics as a career and get in on the ground floor which still existed back then. The idea that emergency medicine covered all fields was interesting because it was a bit contradictory to my personality. In college, I was a biochemistry major. I liked the idea of being able to have complete knowledge of a subject before walking into a final. In emergency medicine, there ain't no way you can do that. You have to be accomplished in every single field, but to be *the* expert in that field is an impossible task. So I was going into something that was going to challenge me and challenge the way I had looked at medicine, if not at life, prior to that point. The other [idea] is being able to take care of people in that special moment in their life—when they haven't expected to wake up in the morning and have their wife die or have their child be severely injured or paralyzed in a car crash. There are many magic moments that have come from that in my career. Being able to be with patients in those partly miraculous, partly tragic times is a tremendous opportunity.⁵

John Marx, MD

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Emergency medicine is fun, fast-paced, challenging and allows me to make a difference in people's lives on a daily basis.⁶

Deborah Hill, MD

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Emergency medicine allows me to help patients at a time when they need help most, and allows me to be the first physician diagnosing and treating the patient's emergent problem. I enjoy the variety and challenge involved in treating individuals of many different ages, cultural preferences, and ethnicities who come to the emergency department with a vast spectrum of medical, traumatic, and psychological needs.⁷

David H. Schiff, MD

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According to the University of Alberta, the best things about the specialty are:

- “Diversity of problems and patients with lots of pathology
- Acute care medicine
- Front line work that allows us to see undifferentiated patients not yet assessed by any physician
- “After most ED shifts I feel good about myself at the end of the day.”
- Flexible work hours and areas of interest
- Shift work as opposed to being “on call”
- Great mix of procedural skills and problem solving
- We are true patient advocates, and work hard to get the best care for the people we see, many of whom have little to no access to primary care.
- Lifestyle! Because of the flexible hours, there is a lot of time to gear towards family, interests, and outside life.

Most Emergency Physicians choose their career because they enjoy problem solving in acute care medicine, and they enjoy the lifestyle. They are comfortable with uncertainty, can live without follow up of their patients, and able to rely on other members of the medical team.”⁸

University of Alberta

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I am a young emergency physician and I love what I do. I love the excitement and challenge of treating a wide variety of patients and illnesses. I enjoy caring for the young and the old, the rich and the poor. I find great satisfaction in handling any acute emergency medical condition that arrives by ambulance or walks through the door. As an emergency physician, I rely on primary care physicians and specialty physician consultation in caring for patients. I enjoy the daily interaction with internists, surgeons, pediatricians and radiologists, as well as a wide spectrum of other specialists. This collegial, dynamic relationship is both challenging and rewarding. These are the exact reasons I decided to become an emergency physician.⁹

Thomas J. Peitz, MD

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I feel like the emergency medicine physician is the only practitioner of true medicine, certainly acute care medicine. In this country we have so many doctors and so many specialists that each one feels very confident in their own special niche and few feel comfortable outside it. Who would you rather find bending over you after you collapse on a plane or in a theater, a neurologist or an emergency physician? A family physician certainly sees a variety of things but who sees their patients when they wake up with sudden chest pain? Where do they send their patients with severe shortness of breath? I decided to be a emergency medicine physician not because I wanted to be a cowboy, not because I wanted to fit in more surfing, and not because I enjoy passing the buck. I did it because I wanted to see it all and feel comfortable with it all.¹⁰

Ryan Shanahan, MD

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I love the variety and I like solving problems," he says. "As emergency medicine specialists, we have to know how to treat a variety of medical conditions, and I love that we can immediately help people feel better."¹¹

David M. Jaffe, MD

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Nowhere in the hospital is the multidisciplinary nature of medical care more pronounced than in the ER. Nurses, respiratory therapists, paramedics, firefighters, police and a whole host of others gather in the ER to routinely provide care or support to patients with various medical problems. It is hard to describe the pleasure to be gained from watching or coordinating a large group of people seamlessly working together during a critical resuscitation. The variety - Jack-of-all-trades — that's the ER doctor in a nutshell. From lacerations to heart attacks, appendicitis to jock itch, we see it all. The cool equipment - There are a ton of machines that go ping in the ER, and a lot of them are really neat. As someone who was never attracted to video games, it may seem odd to be fascinated by electronic devices. Emergency medicine is expanding as a specialty and the incorporation of ever more versatile equipment just adds to the enjoyment. We're using our own ultrasound machines to speed up the diagnostic process and to help us do things we used to do blindly. Advanced robotic simulators are taking the place of good old Resusci Anne (Laerdal Medical) for teaching, and things like video laryngoscopes are just plain fun to use.¹²

Heather Murray, MD

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My decision to pursue emergency medicine came during a trip to France between my third and fourth years of medical school. At that point, I was only halfheartedly sure about my medical pursuits. After several long bike rides through the Loire Valley, my reflections led me to realize that I just simply liked everything in medicine and I wanted to "do it all." That insight led me to pursue emergency medicine.¹³

Elizabeth Bahn, MD

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I love Emergency Medicine because of the number of new people I meet every day and the variety of cases I see. There's always something different, and I like having to think on my feet.¹⁴

Stanford Ken Ishihara, MD

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For undergrad, I decided to stay in Houston and study biochemistry at Rice University. It was during these years that I became involved with a small volunteer fire department. This was my first exposure to emergency service and I loved every minute of it. Taking paramedic courses at night and over the summers, I entered the world of emergency medicine, and it was because of these experiences that I decided to apply for medical school.¹⁵

Nathan Deal, MD

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“In emergency medicine, we are treating people at some of the worst moments of their lives. One of my greatest satisfactions is being part of a team that gives emergency patients what they need and puts them on the road to recovery.”

"Emergency medicine is challenging, but also satisfying," she says. "Like every other part of medicine, we're asked to do more with less these days. In the emergency room, we're the safety net and we see it all. There's a saying that the emergency room is a microcosm of society, and that's true. But the most rewarding aspect of my career is going to work every day and trying to help."¹⁶

Debra G. Perina, MD

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“I love the variety, not knowing what I might see or do on a given day at work, and being able to make a difference in someone's life when they are acutely ill and have nowhere else to go,” she said. “I enjoy providing care for our population's underserved and uninsured residents. I love the fast pace and having to use all of the knowledge I gained through my medical school training because the field is so broad. I quickly found out during my clinical rotations that I thrive in an environment of controlled chaos and was able to work well under pressure, so the decision was very easy.”¹⁷

Emily Mills, M.D

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I loved all the rotations in medical school, but Emergency Medicine gave me enough variety to stay fascinating. You actually make a difference and have immediate results from your interaction with the patient. I just love going to work and meeting new people. There is no other career in this world that I would rather do.¹⁸

Dr. Michael Rogowski

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“I love the detective work involved in evaluating a patient,” explains Winther. “I find it rewarding because, in general, patients are scared and putting their trust in a complete stranger. I feel like I fix broken things or at least point patients in the right direction.”¹⁹

Dr. Mark Winther

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As emergency physicians, we wear many hats. One of the roles I have always enjoyed most, and the one that drew me to emergency medicine as a career, is the emergency physician as detective. We take a history and perform a physical exam looking for clues that will help us "sleuth" the patient's diagnosis. Many other specialties do not have the same opportunity to work up undifferentiated patients and I still find this as rewarding today as I did with my first patient as a fourth year medical student in the emergency department. Making a difficult diagnosis is one of the things that keep me motivated and makes me love emergency medicine as much today as I did when I chose it as a career.²⁰

Julie A. O’Sullivan, MD

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Emergency medicine fits me perfectly. I love the pace, the variety, the diagnostic challenges, the teamwork, and all the stimulation a shift in the ED provides. I can’t imagine practicing any other specialty. One of my favorite aspects of EM is that there is always more to learn. The breadth of EM is enormous and keeping up with advances is challenging, but it’s a challenge I embrace.²¹

Scott Votey, MD

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I got into Emergency Medicine early in life. My father is a paramedic, which motivated me to get my EMT-B certification during college and to continue to a Bachelor of Science in Biology at UT-Arlington. I worked as a scribe through college completing T-sheet charts for EM physicians. It was unique as a pre-med student to be gainfully employed in an environment with that breadth of pathology, that mix of procedures, and a group of enthusiastic physicians who loved their jobs and lives. My passion for Emergency Medicine was born.²²

Jay Allan Allport, DO

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As for developing a career, being a great EM physician alone is a wonderful career. The job is intellectually challenging – there is always something to learn, be it a different way to manage an old problem or a new approach to a procedure. It is also emotionally and personally rewarding as we provide a community service every minute we are in the ED. When people are sick, injured, cold, lonely, they come to us, and they are relieved that we are there. Although leaving a busy, sick shift can be a relief to us, we cannot forget that we affected each of those patients with our management and our presence at a time when they were most vulnerable.²³

Jackie Mahal, MD

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There is no question in my mind that emergency medicine is the best of the specialties to practice unless one has settled on a specific area of interest that one has a passion about, such as oncology. The ability to take care of all aspects of medicine, which happens in emergency medicine, is most satisfying. The variety of people and presentations of illnesses and injuries is infinite. There is always something new to learn or with which to refresh one's memory. And to be able to be so intimate with patients and families on one hand, but also to be able to walk away with impunity at the end of the shift, can keep the burden of problems of others from becoming too heavy.²⁴

Diana Fite, MD

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He attended New Jersey Medical School and then came to East Tennessee State University for his residency. Initially, he followed the path of a surgeon, but after a couple of years in the operating room, he decided his calling was somewhere else — emergency medicine.

"I got into medicine because I was fascinated with the intricacies of the human body, and I've always had a desire to help other people," he said.

He also felt the atmosphere of the emergency department was something for which he was well-suited. "It's the variability of what you see that drew me to it," he said. "There are some surgical aspects, but it's just the whole diversity of the field that I really enjoy."²⁵

Dr. Mark Wilkinson

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Phillips thrives on the variety of cases he sees in the ER.

“You get to see everybody’s patients, because they come through the ER first, so you get to do a little of everyone’s specialty,” he said. “So it just makes it fun.

“Every shift is different. Some are busy, some are slower. You never know who’s going to come through the door.” Phillips realizes the impact he can have on patients and their families in a crisis situation.

“If someone dies or is critically hurt, what you say or what you do is really going to stick with them,” he said. “It might be kind of a small blip on your day, but it’s a big deal for the patients.”²⁶

Justin Daniel Phillips, MD

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As I was finishing up medical school I was very torn about what to do. Traditionally Columbia MD/PhD's did internal medicine, neurology or pathology. A few did peds and a very rare few did ophtho, derm or neurosurg. Nobody did EM. My research interests were most aligned with allergy-immunology or rheumatology but I didn't really enjoy the clinical aspects of those fields. I liked the more critical care oriented fields like cards or pulmonary but I wasn't sure I loved them enough to do all those years of residency and fellowship and I wasn't sure I liked the research side of those fields as much. My wife was already an EM attending and she showed me some basic science papers by Steven Thom and basically said, "look you can do basic research and still do EM." Then I met Dr. Thom and realized it really was possible. I did an elective month at Denver Health and really enjoyed it. I liked the pace, the variety, and the procedures. I also really enjoy the intellectual challenge of starting with an essentially unworked up patient and trying to figure out what is wrong with them and how to fix it with a limited amount of data and time to work with. Gradually, I realized that I could do a three or four year EM residency and then go back into the lab. I wouldn't be out of the lab any longer than if I did IM plus the clinical part of the fellowship and with the broad range of EM and the freedom to do what I wanted I wouldn't have to fit my research into the boundaries of a specific subspecialty. In the end after interviewing in IM and EM I ranked all the EM programs ahead of the IM programs. Some people at Columbia were kind of shocked and I think a few were sort of "peeved" when they saw my match but most of the reaction was blunted by the fact that an MD/PhD classmate had chosen to match in orthopedics that year.²⁷

Kevin Merrell, MD/PhD

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My choice to care for sick and injured children can probably be directly attributed to the fact that my father is a holocaust survivor who lost most of his family members at a very young age. Its my belief that his instinct and desire to be a problem-solver and to do things that made a difference for people who are suffering directly influenced my life.

Children are very vulnerable human beings, and when they are sick or suffering, it can have a tremendous impact on them and their families. I enjoy emergency medicine because I get to have a direct and immediate positive impact on the suffering of these children and their families.²⁸

Alan Nager, MD

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