

# Researchers suggest empathy be a factor in medical school admissions

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High empathy scores could become part of the criteria for getting into medical school, according to research published in *The Journal of the American Osteopathic Association*.

The study gauged empathy levels of 16,149 new matriculants and first-through fourth-year medical students, establishing a set of national norms, which serve as a bench mark for assessing future applicants' suitability to the profession.

Researchers say the national norms can help to distinguish between two applicants with similar academic qualifications, and identify students who might need additional educational remedies to bolster their level of empathy.

"Testing for empathy should not replace the traditional admissions process," says Mohammedreza Hojat, Ph.D., a research professor of psychiatry and human behavior at Sidney Kimmel Medical College of Thomas Jefferson University and lead author on this study. "However, it can add great value in helping medical schools select individuals who rank high on empathic orientation toward patient care as well as academic capabilities."

Research indicates that physicians with higher levels of empathy demonstrate greater clinical competence and deliver better [patient outcomes](#) than less empathetic doctors.

"When patients feel like their doctor cares about and understands them, they are more likely to trust," Hojat explains. "Patients who trust their doctors are more likely to reveal more about their lifestyle and other factors relevant to their illness, allowing for more accurate diagnoses and appropriate treatments."

Patient compliance also improves when trust develops in physician-patient relationship, meaning patients are more likely to follow instructions, including taking medication and changing harmful habits.

### **A growing field of study**

Hojat and his team cross-sectional study assessed empathy scores at all levels of [medical school](#) education for more than 16,000 osteopathic medical students across 41 campuses. This nationwide study developed national norms in empathy for the first time, allowing researchers to examine a number of issues, including differences in empathy among students in different years of medical school.

"Some studies with allopathic medical students showed that once they move from the first two years in medical school and into the clinical years, when they actually work with patients, their empathy begins to decline," says Hojat. "It's interesting to see if that pattern of decline can also be observed in osteopathic medical students and to explore reasons for such changes, and study approaches to enhance and retain [empathy](#) in physicians-in-training."

To better understand the causes of these changes and their impact on [academic performance](#) and clinical competence, Hojat and his team are undertaking a prospective longitudinal study to follow up a cohort of students entering medical schools in the coming academic year (2019-2020) as they progress through medical [school](#) from matriculation to graduation.

**More information:** *Journal of the American Osteopathic Association* (2019). [DOI: 10.7556/jaoa.2019.091](https://doi.org/10.7556/jaoa.2019.091)

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