

June 20, 2013



## MBA vs MHA: Which Degree is Best for You?

By Michelle Mudge-Riley & Barsam Kasravi

For a doctor, business school offers the allure of acquiring additional skills beyond the practice of medicine. It's a way to understand and speak to the "business side of medicine" and a way to get involved in leadership opportunities. However, it's a big decision to go back to school. Not only can business school be expensive, it can be time consuming.

Many doctors who want to transition from a clinical career into a part-time or full-time non-clinical career hold the belief that the only way to do it is to pursue an advanced degree and get initials such as, MBA, MMM or MHA, behind their MD or DO.

Ten years ago, I chose to go to business school. My decision was two-fold. First, I have always been interested in the business side of medicine. Secondly, I didn't know what else to do at the time to find a non-clinical opportunity in health care that would pay me a decent salary. My ultimate choice was to get a masters in health administration (MHA).

My friend and colleague, Barsam Kasravi also chose to go to business school. Last year he finished his masters in business administration (MBA). Recently, we had a conversation about the benefits and drawbacks associated with the decision to go back to school and earn

a business degree. Here are some of the main points we'd like to share with you.

### **What are the advantages of an advanced degree?**

**Michelle:** "An advanced degree will give you the credibility you might otherwise lack in the world outside of clinical medicine. More and more jobs and leadership positions are being created as the healthcare landscape changes and health reform is implemented. An advanced degree will not only help you understand the meaning behind some of the business language, it can also help you secure a position that allows you to participate in some of the changes and new ideas affecting our colleagues now and in the future."

**Barsam:** "I think the biggest reason to get an MBA is to learn how to think like an executive and give you exposure to people who are in different clinical and non-clinical roles in health care. An MBA will become part of an entire package you present to your current or future employers when applying for a job or looking for a promotion. You may also be able to use the concepts at your work to advance your career as you improve your executive and business skills. With an MBA, you are learning a new language, just like anatomy, psychiatry and biochemistry. You will not remember all your accounting formulas or your statistics, but you will start to look at problems differently and come up with solutions through a business framework."

### **What is the difference between an MHA and an MBA degree? Why did we make our particular choice?**

**Barsam:** "I was able to understand organizational development, finance, how to manage a budget, how to analyze and interpret data, and how to look at operations as a system. These skills have helped me manage people more effectively, improve processes in my current work, and be able to manage my budget with tools I learned with my MBA. I chose to get an on-line MBA, which was the best option for me at the time, given my two young kids and demanding job. I learned a great deal and was able to meet people through doing projects over the phone or on e-mail. The only challenge was that I missed out on the networking and face-to-face learning that comes with regular MBA school. However, given my other responsibilities, it seemed the best fit program for me at the time as I was not able to commit to a full-time or even an executive MBA degree at the time."

**Michelle:** "Although I wanted to learn the business side of medicine, I wanted to learn it through examples of business concepts that related to health care. I also knew I wanted to stay in the health care field, even though I didn't want to practice clinical medicine. My long-term goals included a leadership or strategy type position in health care and I wanted to take advantage of what I had already accomplished

(becoming a doctor). I chose to start in an executive MHA program and then switched to a full-time MHA program in order to take advantage of the business residency experience, a one-year on-the-job training program available to most MHA students.”

### **Why should someone not get an advanced degree?**

**Michelle:** “The biggest misconception about getting an advanced degree is that a job will be the direct result of the advanced degree. That’s just not true. Networking and experience will get you a job. If you want to enhance your skill set, gain valuable networking contacts outside your clinical domain and be exposed to new ideas and solutions, you should pursue the degree. If you have a real interest in learning about and understanding the business side of medicine, you should pursue the degree. If you just want to add to your credentials or if it’s the easy way out of what feels like a bad or untenable clinical situation, you will regret enrolling in an advanced degree program and you run the risk of wasting a large amount of time and money. “

**Barsam:** “I always remind students that advanced degrees will not be similar to getting your MD and having a new world of opportunities at your doorstep. An MBA alone will not likely change your career path on day one after graduation; however it will set you on the path of gaining experience and connections towards an executive role in the future. For those looking to move from clinical medicine to a non-clinical role, just like the MD, the MBA will require time and experience that will come after the degree is obtained. An MBA is not the only way to gain business knowledge, to grow as an executive, or to change career paths. Nothing replaces business experience. If you have an opportunity to gain business experience in your current role or outside with an organization, it will serve you well and help you significantly in your career path towards an executive role, possibly more than an advanced degree.”

**Michelle:** “If you decide to go for it and want to know how to proceed, the next step is to figure out if you want to go back to school full-time, part-time or in an Executive program. It may also be important to consider school ranking. For example, an MBA from Harvard may trump an MHA from a less well-known school. Be sure you look at accreditation status of the programs you are considering. Currently there are many on-line and in-person MBA and MHA programs available. Alternatively, executive MBA and MHA programs allow individuals who are working during the day to take classes on weekends and nights and can be a way to fit in this education, given a person’s other commitments in work and in family life.

*Barsam Kasravi is currently a managing medical director for WellPoint’s California Health Plan. He can be reached at [barsamk@gmail.com](mailto:barsamk@gmail.com).*

*Michelle Mudge-Riley, DO, MHA, is the founder of Physicians Helping Physicians. She can be reached at [mudgeriley@yahoo.com](mailto:mudgeriley@yahoo.com) or [www.phphysicians.com](http://www.phphysicians.com).*