

Career Choices: Academic psychiatry

Saeed Ahmed, MD, and Donald W. Black, MD

Editor's note: Career Choices features a psychiatry resident/fellow interviewing a psychiatrist about why he or she has chosen a specific career path. The goal is to inform trainees about the various psychiatric career options, and to give them a feel for the pros and cons of the various paths.

In this Career Choices, Saeed Ahmed, MD, Chief Resident at Nassau University Medical Center, East Meadow, New York, talked with Donald W. Black, MD, Professor of Psychiatry, Department of Psychiatry, University of Iowa Roy J. and Lucille A. Carver College of Medicine, Iowa City, Iowa. Dr. Black is also Editor-in-Chief of *ANNALS OF CLINICAL PSYCHIATRY*, and Secretary/Treasurer and former President of the American Academy of Clinical Psychiatrists. He is a clinical and translational researcher with more than 300 publications. His work has focused on the course and treatment of severe personality disorders, including researching the effectiveness of the Systems Training for Emotional Predictability and Problem Solving (STEPPS) program for borderline personality disorder. He also conducts family and follow-up studies of behavioral addictions, including gambling disorder.

Dr. Ahmed: What made you choose the academic track, and how did your training lead you towards this path?

Dr. Black: I had always been interested in the idea of working at a medical school,

and enjoyed writing and speaking. I was exposed to clinical research as a resident, and that confirmed my interest in academia, because I could envision combining all my interests, along with patient care. I always thought that patients were a major source of ideas for research and writing.

Dr. Ahmed: What are some of the pros and cons of working in academia?

Dr. Black: The pros include being able to influence future physicians through my teaching and writing; being able to pursue important research; and not being isolated from peers. Other advantages are being largely protected from utilization review; having more free time than peers in the private sector, who have difficulty finding coverage; and having defined benefits and a steady salary. I also share call with many peers.

When it comes to the cons, salaries are lower than in the private sector. The cons also include not being my own boss, and sometimes having to bend to the whims of an institution or supervisor.

Dr. Ahmed: Are you required to conduct research?

continued



Saeed Ahmed, MD



Donald W. Black, MD

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Disclosures

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Clinical Point

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Dr. Black: Yes. This is one of the best aspects of my job: being able to make clinical discoveries that I can disseminate through writing and speaking. Over time, this has become increasingly challenging due to the difficulty of obtaining research funding from foundations or the federal government. This has become highly problematic, particularly for clinical researchers, because the National Institutes of Health has clearly been favoring neuroscience.

Dr. Ahmed: What is your typical day like?

Dr. Black: Because of the many hats I wear (or have worn), each day is different from the other. I combine patient care with research, writing, speaking, teaching, and administration. As a tenure-track faculty member, I am expected to write grants, conduct research, and publish. My clinical-track peers primarily provide patient care and teach students and residents.

Dr. Ahmed: What is unique about working in a training institute vs private practice?

Dr. Black: As an academic psychiatrist, I feel I have the best of both worlds: patient care combined with opportunities my private practice colleagues do not have. Because I have published widely, and have developed a reputation, I am frequently invited

to speak at meetings throughout the United States, and sometimes internationally. Travel is a perk of academia, and as someone who loves travel, that is important.

Dr. Ahmed: Where do you see psychiatry going?

Dr. Black: Psychiatry will always be an important specialty because no one else truly cares about patients with psychiatric illnesses. Mental illness will not go away, and society needs highly trained individuals to provide care. There are many "me too" clinicians who now share in caring for patients with psychiatric illnesses, but psychiatrists will always have the most training, and are in a position to provide supervision to others and to direct mental health care teams.

Dr. Ahmed: What advice do you have for residents contemplating a career in academic psychiatry?

Dr. Black: Because most medical schools now have both tenure and clinical tracks, no one needs to feel left out. Those who are interested in scholarly activities will gravitate to the tenure track, and all that requires in terms of grants and papers, while those who are primarily interested in patient care and teaching will choose the clinical track.



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