

Dermatology on Duty: Pathways to a Career in Military Medicine

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PRACTICE POINTS

- Dermatologists have diverse pathways to serve the military and veteran communities, either in uniform or as civilians.
- For those considering a military career, options include medical school scholarships or direct commission after residency.
- Those who prefer to remain civilians can find employment opportunities with the Military Health System or the Department of Veterans Affairs that provide a way to care for this population without a service commitment.

For dermatologists interested in serving military personnel, veterans, and their families, opportunities are available within 2 distinct systems: the Military Health System (MHS), which cares for active-duty service members, retirees, and their families, and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), which serves the veteran population. The primary routes to service are detailed, including uniformed pathways such as medical school scholarships and direct commissions for board-certified physicians, as well as civilian federal employment opportunities (eg, General Schedule [GS] and Title 38 positions). This article highlights that, while financial compensation may differ from the private sector, the intangible benefits make military medicine a unique and compelling calling.

Serving those who serve has been one of the most meaningful parts of my career. A career in military medicine offers dermatologists not only a chance to practice within a unique and diverse patient population but also an opportunity to contribute to something larger than themselves. Whether working with active-duty

service members and their families within the Military Health System (MHS) or caring for veterans through the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the experience can be both enriching and rewarding. This article will explore the various pathways available to dermatologists to serve military communities, whether they are at the start of their careers or are looking for a change of pace within their established practice.

Care Pathways for Military and Veterans

To care for uniformed service members, their families, and retired personnel, dermatologists typically serve within the MHS—a global, integrated network of military hospitals and clinics dedicated to delivering health care to this population.¹ TRICARE is the health insurance program that covers those eligible for care within the system, including active-duty and retired service members.² In this context, it is important to clarify what the term *retired* actually means, as it differs from the term *veteran* when it comes to accessing health care options, and these terms frequently are conflated. A retired service member is an individual who completed at least 20 years of active-duty service or who has been medically retired because of a condition or injury incurred while on active duty.³ In contrast, a veteran may not have completed 20 years of service but has separated honorably after serving at least 24 continuous months.⁴ Veterans typically receive care through the VA system.⁵

Serving on Active Duty

In general, there are 2 main pathways to serve as a dermatologist within the MHS. The first is to commission in the military and serve on active duty. Most often, this pathway begins with a premedical student applying to medical

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school. Those considering military service typically explore scholarship programs such as the Health Professions Scholarship Program (HPSP) (<https://www.medicinethemilitary.com/applying-and-what-to-expect/medical-school-programs/hpsp>) or the Health Services Collegiate Program (HSCP), or they apply to the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USU) (<https://www.usuhs.edu/about>). The HPSP and HSCP programs financially support medical students training at civilian medical schools, though in different ways—the HPSP covers tuition and fees, while the HSCP provides a salary during training but does not cover tuition.⁶ In contrast, students of USU attend the nation's only military medical school, serving in uniform for 4 years while earning the pay and benefits of a junior officer in their respective service branch. Any premedical student considering the HPSP, HSCP or USU routes for service must meet the commissioning standards of their chosen branch—Army, Navy, or Air Force—and enter service as an officer before beginning medical school.

While direct commission prior to medical school is the most common route to active-duty service, board-certified dermatologists also can join a military branch later through what is called Direct Accession or Direct Commission; for example, the Navy offers a Residency to Direct Accession program, which commissions residents in their final year of training to join the Navy upon graduation. In some cases, commissioning at this stage includes a bonus of up to \$600,000 in exchange for a 4-year active-duty commitment.⁷ The Army and Air Force offer similar direct commission programs, though specific incentives vary.⁸ Interested residents or practitioners can contact a local recruiting office within their branch of interest to learn more. Direct accession is open at many points in a dermatologist's career—after residency, after fellowship, or even as an established civilian practitioner—and the initial commissioning rank and bonus generally reflect one's level of experience.

Serving as a Civilian

Outside of uniformed service, dermatologists can find opportunities to provide care for active-duty service members, veterans, and military families through employment as General Schedule (GS) employees. The GS is a role classification and pay system that covers most federal employees in professional, administrative, and technical positions (eg, physicians). The GS system classifies most of these employees based on the complexity, responsibility, and qualifications required for their role.⁹ Such positions often are at the highest level of the GS pay scale, reflecting the expertise and years of education required to become a dermatologist, though pay varies by location and experience. In contrast, physicians employed through

the VA system are classified as Title 38 federal employees, governed by a different pay structure and regulatory framework under the US Code of Federal Regulations.¹⁰ These regulations govern the hiring, retention, and firing guidelines for VA physicians, which differ from those of GS physicians. A full explanation is outside of the scope of this article, however.

Final Thoughts

In summary, uniformed or federal service as a dermatologist offers a meaningful and impactful way to give back to those who have served our country. Opportunities exist throughout the United States for dermatologists interested in serving within the MHS or VA. The most transparent and up-to-date resource for identifying open positions in both large metropolitan areas and smaller communities is USAJOBS.gov. While financial compensation may not always match that of private practice, the intangible benefits are considerable—stable employment, comprehensive benefits, malpractice coverage, and secure retirement, among others. There is something deeply fulfilling about using one's medical skills in service of a larger mission. The relationships built with service members, the sense of shared purpose, and the opportunity to contribute to the readiness and well-being of those who serve all make this career path profoundly rewarding. For dermatologists seeking a practice that combines professional growth with purpose and patriotism, military medicine offers a truly special calling.

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