

The Power of Perseverance: My 31-Year Journey to Finish Medical School

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Abstract

This experience-based narrative recounts the author's return to medical school after a 31-year hiatus, highlighting the unique challenges and personal growth associated with completing a medical degree later in life. The aim of this reflection was to illustrate how nontraditional pathways can still lead to meaningful academic achievement and professional development. The author withdrew from medical school due to financial hardship and a family tragedy. Over the following decades, they built a successful global career in the pharmaceutical industry, eventually leading a professional organization dedicated to the Medical Science Liaison profession. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic created an unprecedented opportunity to resume medical education through virtual instruction. At the age of 48, the author re-enrolled and began medical school from the beginning, all while continuing to manage their responsibilities as a Chief Executive Officer. The narrative follows the integration of academic demands with ongoing executive leadership, the emotional and intellectual challenges of returning to school at a later stage in life, and the insights gained from unique clinical rotations, including those at internationally recognized institutions. The story culminates in graduation at age 51 with top academic honors. This account aims to inspire readers by demonstrating that persistence, adaptability, and discipline can overcome nontraditional barriers to completing a medical degree.

The Experience

I first started medical school thirty-one years ago with the goal of becoming a physician. Unfortunately, due to financial hardship and a family tragedy involving my mother's illness and her subsequent death, I had no choice but to withdraw. It was a painful decision, one that changed the course of my life. My desire to pursue a career in medicine was inspired in part by the physicians who treated my mother during her illness. However, given the circumstances and the financial challenges that followed, continuing medical school was no longer possible. At the time, I realized I needed to find a new career, although I had no idea what that would be.

Over time, I pursued further education, earning a master's degree in Biology and a PhD in Health Science, both of which established the foundation for my eventual career.

Professionally, I discovered the pharmaceutical industry and specifically the Medical Science Liaison (MSL) role. I began my career as an MSL and advanced into MSL leadership, followed by executive positions in Medical Affairs. These roles enabled me to live and work in 11 countries and lead MSL operations across 60 countries. Eventually, I transitioned out of the pharmaceutical industry to lead the Medical Science Liaison Society (MSL Society), the only professional association dedicated to advancing the global MSL profession. While leading the MSL Society, I have trained MSL teams for more than 75 companies. I

also authored two books,^{1,2} including "The Medical Science Liaison Career Guide: How to Break Into Your First Role," which became an Amazon #1 best-seller and received multiple international awards, along with numerous other publications, awards, and industry recognitions.

Over the past 25 years, I have built a successful global career in Medical Affairs, earned advanced degrees, contributed meaningfully to the MSL profession, collaborated closely with physicians, contributed to scientific knowledge, and influenced patient care strategies worldwide. However, despite all this success, not finishing the MD remained a deeply personal regret.

I never stopped thinking about going back to finish the degree. It was never about career advancement or professional validation; it was about personal fulfillment. I did not want to look back one day and wonder, "What if?"

A Pandemic, a Turning Point, and a Once-in-a-Lifetime Opportunity

The decision to return to medical school came as a result of an extraordinary and unpredictable moment in history: the COVID-19 pandemic. It disrupted nearly every aspect of life, including education. When I learned that, for the first time, the basic sciences of medical school would be offered entirely through virtual instruction, it was an immediate epiphany.^{3,4} I realized immediately that attending medical school virtually was a once-

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About the Author: Dr. Samuel Dyer graduated with Distinguished Honors in 2024 from Washington University (Health & Science) School of Medicine, ranking in the top 5% of his class. He is a recognized leader in the Medical Science Liaison profession and the author of the multi-award-winning and Amazon #1 Best Seller, *The Medical Science Liaison Career Guide: How to Break into Your First Role*, which has received multiple prestigious awards.

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in-a-lifetime opportunity, and likely the only realistic chance I would ever have to return and complete my degree.

Although I have always been very driven and persistent, after three decades, the idea of returning to medical school had seemed unrealistic. The traditional demands of medical education, including attending classes on campus, relocating, pausing my professional responsibilities, and stepping away from the life I had built, always made it seem out of reach.

But when I learned that it was possible to attend medical school temporarily online, I realized that every previous limitation had been eliminated. Suddenly, what had once felt completely impossible now seemed achievable.

Despite this rare and unexpected opportunity, the decision to pursue it was not easy. During the application process, I was informed that I would not receive credit for any of my previous coursework due to how much time had passed, which meant I would need to retake all the basic sciences. At 48 years old, the thought of starting over from day one after a 31-year gap was daunting. I questioned whether I still possessed the cognitive stamina, discipline, or bandwidth to succeed in such a demanding environment while continuing to lead the MSL Society and manage a global schedule.

In fact, I was so unsure that I would be able to complete the degree that I decided not to tell anyone except my wife and one close friend. I did not tell any other family members, colleagues, or even the staff at the MSL Society. For the first two years during the basic sciences, no one knew. At times, I was almost certain I would fail. I did not publicly share my decision until I began clinical rotations and was confident I would complete the degree.

From the beginning, I was very clear about one point: I was not returning to medical school with the intention of practicing medicine, but rather to achieve a long-held personal goal. During the initial application process and throughout every clinical rotation, I communicated my intent to each supervising physician. I was there purely for self-satisfaction, to complete what I began more than thirty years ago.

Balancing Medical School and Global Leadership

Medical school is a demanding experience for any student, but balancing it with the ongoing responsibilities of leading a global organization presents unique challenges that most medical students will never encounter. Throughout all four years, I continued to serve as the CEO of the Medical Science Liaison Society (MSL Society), conducting international MSL training programs, managing a team, speaking at numerous conferences and events, and overseeing numerous other responsibilities.

The demands of medical school had to coexist with the equally high pressures of leading a global organization. One particularly surreal moment occurred during my very last final exam of the

basic sciences. I was traveling in Antarctica and had to complete the exam aboard a ship, relying on limited satellite Wi-Fi. I remember chuckling to myself at the absurdity of the situation, hoping the connection would hold just long enough to click "submit." It was less of a struggle and more of a vivid reminder of how unconventional my journey had become. This path required unwavering commitment, creative problem-solving, and daily determination to keep moving forward. Ultimately, success in this nontraditional journey depended on a unique combination of seven key factors (Figure 1): perseverance, adaptability, unwavering self-discipline, a strong personal support network, professional flexibility, carefully selected and flexible clinical rotations, the availability of virtual instruction, the guidance of supportive faculty, and professional colleagues who understood the demands of a nontraditional path.

Memorable Clinical Rotations

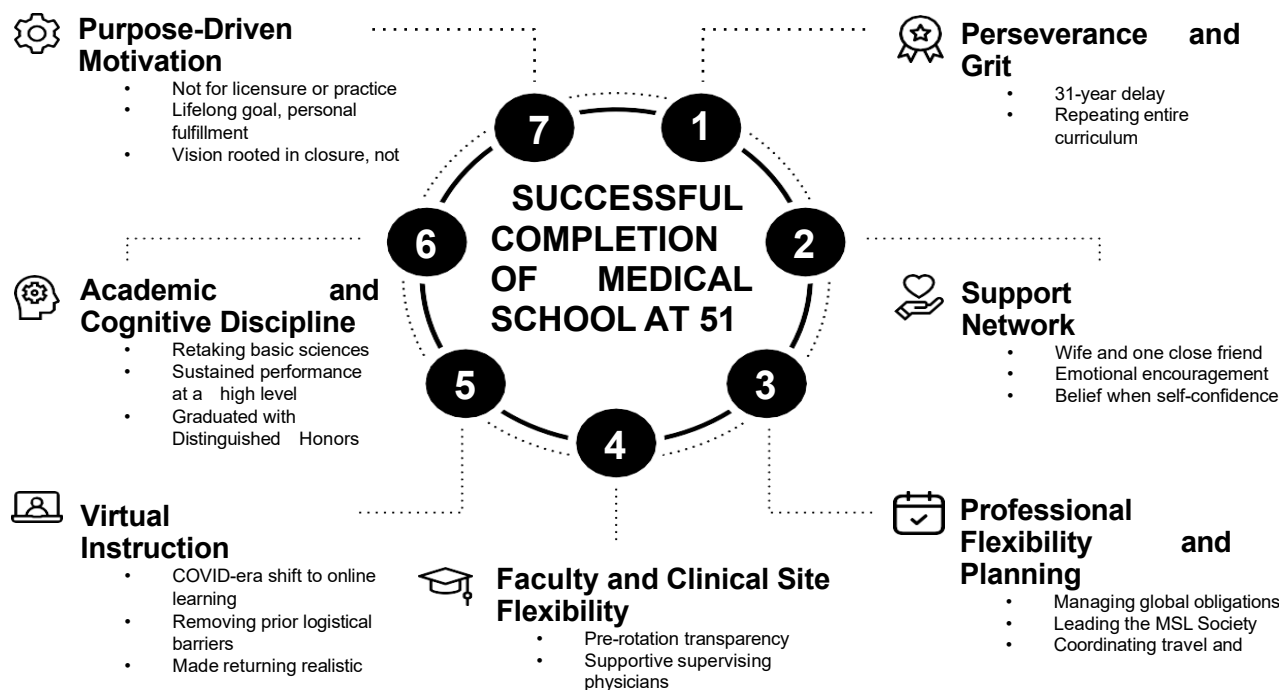
Although I had no plans to practice medicine, I was determined to pursue unique and meaningful elective rotations. However, my circumstances required that the clinicians I worked with be highly flexible and understand the dual responsibilities I was managing. Before each clinical rotation, I was very direct in communicating my situation to the supervising physicians. I explained my ongoing professional obligations and the dual commitment I was managing. All the physicians I rotated with were incredibly supportive. They appreciated the level of dedication it took to return to medical school while simultaneously leading an international organization, and they worked with me to ensure I could meet the requirements of both. During medical school, I was fortunate to complete several outstanding and unique clinical rotations that left a lasting impact:

12-Week Surgery Rotation at Harvard Medical School: An intense and high-pressure environment that instilled in me a profound respect for surgical precision, endurance, and collaboration. I developed a strong relationship with the Program Director of the Residency Training Programs, and I co-authored and published a peer-reviewed systematic review with him.

2-Week Wilderness Medicine Rotation in Switzerland (University of Utah School of Medicine): One of the most physically and mentally demanding experiences. I trained in alpine emergency medicine, remote rescue techniques, and survival-based care high in the Swiss Alps.

10-Week Sports Medicine Rotation with the Miami Dolphins: This unique opportunity provided an insider's perspective of athlete management and rehabilitation. I observed the crucial interactions among medical teams, trainers, and coaching staff aimed at optimizing performance and promoting long-term health.

Each of these experiences deepened my appreciation for medicine and confirmed that, despite my unconventional journey, they were all rewarding learning opportunities.

Figure 1. 7 Key Factors for Nontraditional Medical Student Success: A Personal Framework.

Reflections on My Age and Personal Growth

As a medical student significantly older than most of my peers, I found that my age and professional background seemed to allow me to connect with many of the physicians I worked with during clinical rotations on a different level. I sensed that our shared stages of life, age, and career experience often led to more candid conversations, deeper mentorship, and mutual respect. This dynamic enriched my learning and helped me gain additional insight into clinical practice and leadership in healthcare. It also became a source of personal growth, as I navigated the unique challenges of returning to medical school later in life.

Graduation at 51

In August 2024, I finally graduated from Washington University (Health and Science) School of Medicine at the age of 51. I received Distinguished Honors, ranking in the top 5% of my class, and was selected to deliver a part of the commencement address. It was not just a celebration of academic achievement; it was the culmination of a deeply personal, 31-year journey.

Earning the MD represented fulfilling a lifelong goal and a promise I made to myself that I refused to give up on. Beyond personal satisfaction, the degree also provided scientific and academic credibility that has strengthened my role as the CEO of the MSL Society. It further enhanced the scientific and academic foundation of my responsibilities, lending greater credibility to the training programs, publications, and initiatives I lead within the organization.

Final Reflections

My story is certainly not typical. It does not follow the conventional timeline or path that many associate with medical education.⁵ Yet it conveys a powerful reminder that many students and professionals relate to: it is never too late to pursue a goal that has deep personal meaning.

I hope my experience inspires others, especially nontraditional students or those facing setbacks, to reconsider what is possible. Often, the journey forward is not linear. At times, it is interrupted, postponed, or entirely reimagined.

To anyone reading this who has ever had to step away from a dream, I offer this: it's never too late. You are never too old, and your goals are always worth pursuing and achieving.

For over 25 years, one quote has inspired me through the challenges of my career and motivated me to complete a master's degree, earn a PhD, and successfully return to and finish medical school:

"The difference between a successful person and others is not a lack of strength, not a lack of knowledge, but merely a lack of will." Author: Unknown

Perseverance, discipline, and willpower are essential for success. My journey demonstrates what is possible.

Regardless of how long it takes, never ever give up!

Summary – Accelerating Translation

This article shares the deeply personal and inspiring story of returning to medical school after a 31-year gap. Dr. Samuel Dyer originally began medical school in the early 1990s but had to withdraw due to financial hardship and a family tragedy. Over the next three decades, he built a successful global career in the pharmaceutical industry, becoming a leading expert in the Medical Science Liaison (MSL) profession. Despite his

professional accomplishments, completing the MD remained a personal goal. The COVID-19 pandemic opened a rare opportunity for virtual medical education, which made it possible for him to return. This article explores the unique challenges and growth of completing medical school later in life while simultaneously leading a global organization. It is a story of perseverance, adaptability, and the belief that it is never too late to pursue a dream.

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