

Sending Out an SOS

A decline in the applicant pool threatens podiatry.

BY ANDREA LINNE

A career in podiatry has been called the best kept secret in medicine. Practitioners must step up to help save the profession. There is a serious decline in the number of students applying to podiatric medical colleges. This threatens the podiatry profession.

For the 2021-22 academic year, 910 individuals applied to at least one of the nine podiatric medical schools, according to the American Association of Colleges of Podiatric Medicine (AACPM). There were only 648 first-year students in fall 2021. The number of potential students has fluctuated during the past 10 years. It reached a high of 1,194 applicants in 2015 and a low of 868 applicants in 2018.

“As of March, we have just over

500 students in the applicant pool for the classes that begin in fall 2022,” says Sabrina Minhas, DPM, immediate past president of the Pennsylvania Podiatric Medical Association. “Even if 100 percent of those applicants matriculate, no class of any school will be full.”



Dr. Minhas

competition. There are more medical schools and more colleges of osteopathic medicine, both drawing potential students. Some potential students are also choosing careers as physicians assistants and nurse practitioners. And, of course, the old reasons still exist. Many

“..It is a business, and if they don’t enroll enough students, they may need to cut staff.”—Hanna

“It is a crisis,” says Eric Stamps, DPM, chair of the AACPM board of directors. “We need at least double the number of applicants. But it’s an uphill battle. There’s a lot more

potential students have no exposure to podiatry, and many who may be aware of the profession don’t understand the scope and benefits of

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practicing podiatric medicine and surgery.”

James R. Hanna, DPM, immediate past president of the New York



Dr. Hanna

State Podiatric Medical Association (NYSPMA), agrees that these are critical challenges podiatric medical schools face when recruiting students and adds a few more.

“There are smaller generations coming up, and potential students who are interested in medicine or healthcare also consider optometry and physical therapy.”

Why should you care about the dramatic downturn in podiatry school applications? “If the number of applicants to colleges of podiatric medicine continues to shrink,

the immediate result would be financial problems for the schools,” Dr. Hanna says. “They are in the

of falls, are less likely to use opiates for back pain, and are less likely to be obese because we cure foot

“This crisis has been on the radar of some podiatrists for years.”—Trepal

business of education, but it is a business, and if they don’t enroll enough students, they may need to cut staff.

“Long term, it means you may have trouble hiring associates and selling your practice when you’re ready to retire,” Dr. Hanna says. “Also, as podiatrists, we care about our patients. The NYSPMA conducted studies that found that our treatment for diabetics and wound care is effective, lowering the rate of infections and hospitalizations. Data also show that patients who see podiatrists have a lower incidence

ailments so they can be more active. Our patients are like family. A good end to a career is to make sure there is continuity of care for them. And for that, we need a steady pool of qualified applicants.”



Dr. Trepal

“This crisis has been on the radar of some podiatrists for years,” says Michael Trepal, DPM, dean of

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the New York College of Podiatric Medicine. “Recently, it has become more concerning. We can accommodate a class of 109 students, and we haven’t filled that with qualified students in several years. Rather than admit unqualified students, we absorb the financial loss. The last couple of years, we’ve enrolled approximately 90 to 100 students. The reasons are multifactorial; however, part of the problem is that many podiatrists could be better ambassadors of the profession. Too often in public forums we see negativities rather than the many positives. Unfortunately, we are seeing high-quality applicants sour on a career in podiatric medicine after speaking with a disgruntled DPM or reading spurious comments posted in various social media forums. Granted, we do have our problems that need to be addressed but doing so in unchecked and haphazard fashion only serves to turn off the very folks we want to attract who can make things better. We should be proud of our degree and the benefits we provide to patients.”

The AACPM and the American Podiatric Medical Association (APMA) recently launched action plans to

“APMA’s House of Delegates, composed of members of the association, identified student recruitment as a priority.”—Pickard

address the student recruitment crisis. “The podiatric medical colleges have limited staff to do recruitments, and that’s why we need the help of professional organizations,” Dr. Trepal says.

But podiatrists working to address the crisis also say these organizations can’t do it alone. “There are some 18,000 podiatrists,” Dr. Trepal says. “If each one could convince one person in a year that podiatry is a profession worth considering, we would increase applications considerably, and in the process become more selective to achieve enrollment goals.”

AACPM Targets College Students

To recruit students, the AACPM is targeting the undergraduate student population, with a focus on juniors and seniors. “I was hired to find the next generation of students and increase enrollment of qualified applicants,” says David Green, director of the office of career promotion. “I created a strategic roadmap, which was approved in July 2021. Our signature recruitment tool is a hands-on experience called Workshop in a Box. We have events on college campuses that are led by a DPM. We invite students who may be interested in surgery to try suturing. They can also try wound care, and if they’re interested in sports



David Green

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medicine, they can practice sports taping.

“We’re just restarting these workshops because of the pandemic,” Green says. “In September

among minority students.

“We’re actively developing our social media presence on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter,” Green says.

“This generation values quality of life, so we explain that you can make a good living and have a flexible

and participate in a panel discussion to raise awareness. And, of course, we work with each school to promote their events.”

Dr. Trepal believes the profession must go after low-hanging fruit. “We need to recruit pre-med students in colleges,” he says, “because we need to fill classes in podiatric medical schools now.”

“Participating in podiatric medicine career awareness is a part of my professional obligation.”—Simon

2021, we had a standalone event at the University of North Carolina that was attended by approximately 15 students. We prefer small groups so they get hands-on attention, and we can answer their questions. We keep in touch with the students after the event. In April, we had an event at Claflin University, a private historically black college in South Carolina. Part of our strategic plan is to grow interest in podiatry

schedule and work-life balance. Our strategic plan also includes email and social media campaigns to drive students to our website, where they can access our *College Information Book*. And we will have an active presence at the June conference for the National Association of Advisors for the Health Professions. Many health professions advisors at colleges and universities aren’t familiar with podiatry, so we’ll have a booth and workshops

APMA Targets High-School Students

“In 2018, we noticed there wasn’t a robust applicant pool to podiatric medical colleges,” says Laura Pickard, DPM, who became president of the APMA in March. “APMA’s House of Delegates, composed of members of the association, identified student re-



Dr. Pickard

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cruitment as a priority. In doing so, this governing body tasked APMA with the student recruitment initiative, with the goal of increasing the pool of highly qualified applicants for the colleges of podiatric medicine to help ensure continued growth of the profession. We raised a lot of money to create the *Step Into Podiatry* website. It is intended for high schoolers.”

Tiffany Kildale, APMA’s associate director of young physicians and students, says the organization wanted its work to be research-focused and data-driven. “We worked with a market research firm and found that recruiting college students was too late in their education,” Kildale says. “The key takeaway is that we need to recruit high-school or even middle-school students. At this stage, students are open to a different medical career path, whereas in recruiting students while in undergrad, we find ourselves in the position of convincing them to change their minds about their chosen field of medicine. We also learned that what these students find most appealing about the podiatry profession is the work-life balance and the variety of career paths and practices, including owning a practice, working in a hospital, and focusing on surgery, wound care, or sports medicine.



Tiffany Kildale

“We also learned from our research where prospective students learn about careers and colleges: Google and social media,” Kildale says. “We launched a digital advertising campaign to meet them where they are: Facebook, TikTok, Instagram and YouTube. We lean on podiatric medical students for social media content, so prospective students can relate to the content. We encourage high schoolers to visit the *Step Into Podiatry* website, created to be a hub of information about the podiatric profession. Many high schoolers don’t know that podiatrists are doctors who go to podiatric medical school for their degree, so we feature this prominently in our recruitment messaging.

“An important part of our program is connecting prospective students with podiatric mentors,” Kildale says. “We’ve had more than 1,400 mentor requests. Because of COVID, we had to switch to a virtual mentor program. But now that things are getting better, some students are shadowing podiatrists in their offices.”

“Targeting high school students, while beneficial down the road, does not solve our immediate need,” Dr. Trepal says.

All Hands on Deck

In March, the APMA House of Delegates adopted the Student Recruitment Project, a national program to supplement the current efforts of the APMA and AACPM in building the applicant pool. It recommends that state board members contact colleges through the college science advisors with a request to make a presentation

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to the college's science/medical interest society, student clubs and organizations, or individuals interested in medical careers. The program's rationale: If, for example, 50 boards have six active members, the program would produce 300 recruiters that neither



Dr. Simon

the schools nor the AACPM possess. "The APMA can't enforce the program," Dr. Minhas says, "but we hope the state components realize how serious this problem is and participate. Both the APMA and the AACPM have resources that an individual practitioner can use for a presentation, including written scripts and PowerPoints."

In April, Janet Simon, DPM, who works at the New Mexico Foot & Ankle Institute and is executive director of the New Mexico Podiatric Medical Association, participated in the University of New Mexico's Health Professions Symposium. "I had co-presenters who are fourth-year students at the California School of Podiatric Medicine at Samuel Merritt University," Dr. Simon says. "Participating in podiatric medicine career awareness is a part of my professional

obligation. Students need guidance about their future choices, and they always appreciate the time we spend giving them first-hand information. The need to share what our profession is about is critical to our future, and these local efforts are always successful in connecting with a few interested students."

Dr. Pickard acknowledges that the focus on high-school students won't result in positive outcomes for several years. "We need more APMA members to step up as mentors now," she says. Lauren Wurster, DPM, who practices in Phoenix, participated in the AACPM mentorship program during her residency and is now an APMA mentor. "Being a mentor isn't time-consuming," Dr. Wurster says. "In my high-volume practice, students shadow me around the office, and it doesn't impact the clinic schedule. I always ask patients if they are comfortable with students observing, and most appreciate that I am teaching those who want to be future providers."

Priya Parthasarathy, DPM, who works for Foot & Ankle Specialists of Mid-Atlantic in Silver Spring, MD, encourages podiatrists to become mentors. "I've been practicing and mentoring high school and college students for 10 years," Dr. Parthasarathy says. My philosophy is to give back to our profession. Both my husband and I are podiatrists, and the success of our profession affects our family. I understand our days are busy. You can be flexible and have a student shadow you for a half day, so it doesn't slow down workflow. Or just once a year, you can set up a suture workshop and presentation at your local high school or your alma mater. It's very rewarding to receive an email from a student who got into podiatry school and thanks you for your guidance."



Dr. Parthasarathy

"When students shadow a podiatrist, their opinion of the profession is solidified and that's where we get our applicants," Dr. Stamps says.

"The millions of potential applicants are either unaware of the podiatry profession or they don't see its value," Dr. Trepal says. "The only way to counter this is with education. And who better to educate students than members of our profession. Unfortunately, some podiatrists don't seem proud to support their profession. But many podiatrists do value their degree. We need those podiatrists to become ambassadors. We can solve the problem and increase the number of students who apply to podiatric medical colleges. They will become tomorrow's leaders and build on the advancements of those who came before them and ultimately bring this great profession to the next level." **PM**



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