

The Nathan Smith Society and The History of Pre-medical students at Dartmouth

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It is Tuesday afternoon at Dartmouth College, and one student is witnessing a hip replacement in the operating room, another is sitting in on a team meeting about the treatment of a psychiatric patient, and others are preparing to have dinner with the Dartmouth Medical School Dean. These events are all made possible by the Nathan Smith Pre-Medical Society, (NSS.)

Over the course of the past century, the structure of premedical opportunities at Dartmouth has varied greatly. When the former US Surgeon General Dr. C. Everett Koop '37 was an undergraduate at Dartmouth, there was a combined five-year program with Dartmouth Medical School (DMS). Students would follow a strict pre-med major for three years and then enter DMS during their senior year. After the Flexner Report in 1910, which severely reduced the number of medical schools in the US in order to raise the standards of medical education, DMS became a two-year pre-clinical school whose students often completed their clinical training at Harvard Medical School.

During the 1930's when Dr. Koop was studying at Dartmouth, there was a scientific fraternity, Alpha Delta Phi, which mostly catered to pre-medical students. Faculty advisors mostly came from the biology, chemistry, zoology, and physics departments. While there was no formal committee or organization dedicated to premedical students, Dr. Koop comments that there was "a great collegial atmosphere" among the Dean of the medical school, faculty and premedical students.

It is also worth noting that the medical application process was very different in those days: there was no Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT) and according to Dr. Koop, the competition to get in to medical school "was nothing like it is now." In addition, the entire process was much more personal, and a call from

a well known undergraduate professor could override an unfavorable decision by an admissions committee.

Between November 14 and November 1973, *The Dartmouth*, the college newspaper, ran three feature articles on Dartmouth premedical students. The November 14, 1973 *The Dartmouth* reported that of the 400 to 500 freshmen who declared themselves as premedical students, only 200 would apply to medical school. In existence at the time was the Committee of Premedical Advisors (CPMA), which was available to give students information on pursuing a premedical curriculum. Despite such efforts, *The Dartmouth* reports that the CPMA would "screen" and "synthesize" letters of recommendation, but "universal among the freshman was the hope that more information would be given to them about pre-medical study. Many felt that a brochure or more meetings to acquaint them with premed courses at the college, in addition to information about medical school, was desperately needed" (Hitzman 1973) In addition, the third article addresses the stigma associated with being a premedical student, since most of them had to make many social sacrifices in order to pursue their studies. (Hitzman, Present 1973)

In 1976, the need for a more structured, expansive support network was at last realized with the Nathan Smith Pre-medical Society advised by Dr. Thomas Almy and co-chaired by Edward Dohring '78 and Steven Bova '78. According to *The Dartmouth*, the new society differed from its predecessors because it would "consider health care not only as a career goal for prospective graduate and medical school candidates but also as a major social issue confronting all Americans" (Shavel 1976). To help students with planning their careers, leaders planned to sponsor lectures by the faculty and admissions officers at the medical school and publish a

newsletter called Heartbeat that would “announce future lectures, conferences, dates of tests and interviews, [and] opportunities for resident and leave term employment.” Other programs included dinners with doctors, doctor shadowing opportunities at Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center, and a half hour weekly radio program on WDCR, the college’s radio station. During this program, members would discuss health related topics and personalities. Dr. Almy also sponsored a Health Education Learning Program (HELP) internship as a leave term opportunity.

During spring 1981, NSS nearly fell apart due to mismanagement. According to The Dartmouth, the society had stopped holding meetings and publishing a newsletter (Gaeta 1982). It had nearly lost its recognition from the Council on Student Organizations (COSO,) when Russell Gombosi ’82 and Mark Linskey ’82 decided to spend the fall of 1981 rewriting the constitution and searching for a new advisor. They chose Beverlie Sloane, the health educator at Dick’s House to be the new advisor and then formed a Board of Consultants, which included Thomas Almy and John Turco. The most prominent change to the society was its inclusion of all pre-health related career students including pre-veterinary, pre-dentistry, health administration, public health and future nursing students. Doctor Shadowing was reinstated and they met with Almy to ensure the existence of the HELP internship. In addition, they developed a new program called Career Conversations where undergraduates could meet with health professionals to learn about the true nature of the medical profession.

Doctor Shadowing has long been an integral part of NSS’s activities providing opportunities for Dartmouth undergraduates to experience first hand a wide variety of medical specialties ranging from vascular surgery to psychiatry and primary care. According to vascular surgeon Dr. Daniel Walsh, in the early days of the Nathan Smith Society, doctors were discouraged by the lackadaisical attitudes students brought with them to their assignments. This eventually led to

the suspension of the shadowing program until Dr. Lee A. Witters became the NSS faculty advisor in 1997. Dr. Witters “brought a physician’s perspective to the organization ... and with that came a much more sober serious understanding on the part of the students involved of what this [doctor shadowing] is about [preserving confidentiality.]” comments Dr. Walsh. Such changes have encouraged local physicians to have shadow students because they feel that they are providing young people with an opportunity to discover the true nature of medicine. Dr. Walsh adds that this is important for students without close relatives in medicine because they have no way of learning the lifestyle of a doctor. In addition, Dr. Walsh states that shadowing lets students know “what it’s like to live it [medicine], what it feels like, what it smells like, what the hours are the like, what the people are like as opposed to just reading about it in a book.”

In 1997, its present advisor, Dr. Lee A. Witters assumed responsibility for the Nathan Smith Society and its membership has since grown from 250 members to 700 members. Membership is granted to all Dartmouth undergraduates interested in pursuing careers in health-related fields. Students interested in gaining membership simply need to e-mail the society to be added to its membership list. The society also has an extensive website where students can consult the Pre-Health Peer Advising Hotline with questions, sign up for shadowing assignments, and find advice on the application process to graduate schools in the health professions. Currently NSS has an Executive Committee of 16 undergraduates, which meets twice a term to decide on events the society will sponsor and long term plans. Such student leadership and involvement has helped to make NSS an enduring source of support for Dartmouth’s growing community of aspiring health professionals. Membership to the Executive Committee is open to all NSS members.

In the future, Dr. Witters would like to see NSS become “more service oriented” and not only dedicated to the decision and application process of entering medical school. “Most of the

activities of the society have orbited around either having experiences in the broad field of medicine and that could be from shadowing to speakers or things related to the decision to go to medical school.” Currently, the society has organized a blood drive and has worked closely with the Emergency Medical Services Club at Dartmouth. Recently NSS members also participated in the Cross Cultural trip to Nicaragua that the Tucker Foundation sponsored in December. Dr. Witters wants NSS to show its members that there are many different paths to medical school other than the traditional choice of majoring in the sciences and applying during his or her senior year. Most importantly, he wants students who do go on to medical school to be “well rounded leaders of American medicine.”

For more information on the Nathan Smith Society or Pre-Health Activities at Dartmouth College, interested parties can go to www.dartmouth.edu/~nss.

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We regret to announce that Dr. Thomas Almy, one of the first advisors to the Nathan Smith Society and instrumental in its formation, passed away in May 2002. He joined Dartmouth Medical School's faculty in 1968 from Cornell University College of Medicine. In addition to being heavily involved in both undergraduate premedical and medical education, he was also a prolific author with numerous articles in gastroenterology and internal medicine. Dr. Almy was a Professor Emeritus of Dartmouth Medical School and a member of the National Academies Institutes of Medicine. The DUJS Editorial Board would like to honor Dr. Almy's achievements and offer its heartfelt gratitude for his contributions to the Dartmouth community.