

PROFILES

A man with glasses, wearing a dark blue suit jacket over a light blue striped shirt and dark trousers, is walking on a paved road. He is looking slightly to his right. The background shows a parking lot with trees and a stop sign.

The
LONG ROAD
to becoming a doctor

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Dissecting American health care is common throughout the country, but most people don't consider what it takes to become a health care professional.

Specialized doctors often have extra obstacles in their path. Even if their profession is in high demand, they usually work in smaller clinics or offices, meaning more insurance paperwork, and when it comes to college, they have fewer choices.

Dr. Alex Thomas and Dr. Radu Purtuc are two Michigan doctors new to their field. Both are podiatrists. Thomas just received his license at the beginning of the year and Purtuc is in his third year of residency.

Though there is a high demand for podiatrists, the road to becoming a podiatric medical doctor is extensive, with only nine accredited podiatric medicine colleges and an acceptance rate of only 50 to 60 percent.

The majority of applicants already have at least a bachelor's degree; a Doctor of Podiatric Medicine (DPM) degree requires four more years of school.

A graduate of Barry University in Miami, Thomas received necessary hands-on experience in the clinics he worked at in college and became comfortable working with patients.

Purtuc attended the Scholl College of Podiatric Medicine, which

is part of Rosalind Franklin University. He says the bigger university allowed him to interact with students in other medical fields, giving him an opportunity to see how other practitioners perceive the role of podiatrists.

The typical doctor doesn't earn a full-time salary until ten years after the typical college graduate starts making money. That lost decade of work costs a half-million dollars.

"There's still areas in the medical field where we are not really seen for what we are and what we can do, and I feel like the need to educate people is the first step before I can practice my experience and treat people," Purtuc

says. "I don't think that needs to be done, but I understand that we are still in the early stages of being accepted and known."

After those four years, and upon passing both parts of the National Podiatric Board of Medicine Examination, three years of residency training, or, in a few states, a year-long preceptorship, is required to receive a podiatry license.

In addition to those five to seven years, there's also the cost of podiatric medical school. Annual tuition ranges from \$27,000 to \$33,000, not including extra fees, books or room and board.

The cost of becoming a doctor has soared. It's not unusual to see new physicians a quarter of a million dollars in debt, while average salaries are declining.

The typical doctor doesn't earn a full-time salary until ten years after the typical college graduate starts making money. That lost decade of work costs a half-million dollars, based on a potential \$50,000 annual income. (The typical medical school candidate has the ability to earn considerably more.) Add in the time and cost it takes to pay off medical school debt and pursuing medicine could become a one million dollar endeavor.

Thomas took out loans to cover almost all of his expenses and he is now nearly a quarter million dollars in

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Dr. Radu Purtuc
Henry Ford Wyandotte Hospital

Dr. Radu Purtuc was born in Romania. In the late 80's the government was uprooted, so he and his family migrated to the United States and have lived in Chicago ever since. He paid for his undergraduate school by working full-time as a hospital inpatient pharmacy technician until his citizenship was delayed, forcing him to take a break from his undergraduate studies. He resumed his studies after becoming a U.S. citizen and went onto medical school at Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science. He is now in his third year of residency at Henry Ford Wyandotte Hospital. Purtuc's hobbies include running, playing tennis, reading and photography.



Dr. Alex Thomas
Michigan Foot and Ankle Specialists

Dr. Alexander Thomas is the son of Iraqi immigrants who originally settled in Detroit. He now lives in Orchard Lake Village, MI. He just became certified in podiatric medicine and works at Michigan Foot and Ankle Specialists in Dearborn, MI. Thomas attended Wayne State University as an undergraduate and went on to Barry University in Florida for his Doctor of Podiatric Medicine degree. He also works as an activist with the Shlama Foundation for Iraqi Christian refugees displaced throughout Iraq.

The cost of becoming a doctor has soared. It's not unusual to find new physicians a quarter of a million dollars in debt, while average salaries are declining.



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—Dr. Radu Purtuc



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—Dr. Alex Thomas

THE FOOT

The Body's Diagnostic Window



Podiatrists often detect serious health problems that may otherwise go unnoticed, because many diseases manifest first through symptoms of the lower extremities.

This includes:

- diabetes,
- arthritis,
- heart disease,
- kidney disease.

Michigan's Podiatric physicians are educated in state-of-the-art techniques involving surgery, orthopedics, dermatology, physical medicine and rehabilitation.

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debt, with an addition of \$40 interest daily.

"It seems like it's small in the grand scheme of things," Thomas says, "but when you graduate and you're not making a lot, it just seems like an unfathomable amount to repay."

Aside from the debt, Thomas graduated during a residency shortage, so he moved back to his home state, Michigan, and did a preceptorship instead.

"I would say overcoming a lot of roadblocks in the way after I graduated was even more difficult than the school itself," Thomas says.

Purtuc, on the other hand, is completing his residency at Henry Ford Wyandotte Hospital, and chooses to defer his payments.

"I'm guessing, like everyone else, we are struggling from day to day and we are living on a bare minimum," Purtuc says. "I'd rather defer, and I understand there's going to be a penalty, but it's just something that can

be fixed in the long term and I show that concentrating on my education and not worrying about payment is important to me."

However, even though it's been a difficult road, Thomas and Purtuc find podiatry worth it. According to these young doctors, the feet are a window into the health of the rest of the body and that's what makes the profession challenging and exciting.

Helping New Podiatrists

The MPMA has been at the front lines in working with the Michigan Legislature to keep costs down on young doctors entering podiatry. The association has lobbied legislators to cut bureaucratic red-tape, resolve insurance reimbursement issues and end unreasonable audits periods.

The MPMA has also historically supported legislation to forgive student debt for DPM's looking to practice in underserved areas of the state. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) predicts that

1 in 3 Americans will have Type II diabetes by 2050. This means that the important job Podiatrists do will be in high demand in every corner of Michigan for years to come. Thus, it is vital that Podiatry remain an economically viable career path.

In addition, the association has continued to build relationships with the other healthcare provider associations in the state to speak with a unified voice to the legislature on the financial hurdles that new doctors coming into the profession face. The MPMA has worked arm-in-arm with MD's, DO's, Dentists, Optometrists and Chiropractors to create a better financial environment for young doctors.

One of our primary focuses as an association is to grow the profession and create a better climate for up-and-coming Podiatrists. With this in mind, the MPMA remains focused in promoting Podiatry friendly initiatives with Michigan's leaders. ♦