

## Brent Monseur

*Brent's interest in space exploration and reproductive health have led him to a specialty in Aerospace Gynecology.*



**Undergraduate:** University of Mary Washington, 2009

**Major:** Biochemistry (Concentration: Spanish)

**Graduate university:** Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, 2012

**Discipline (Master of Science):** Reproductive & Cancer Biology

**Medical School:** Virginia Commonwealth University, 2016

**Specialty:** Obstetrics & Gynecology (Aerospace Gynecology)

As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?

Astronaut.

What led to your interest in medicine?

For as long as I can remember, I have had the desire to address health disparities and empower individuals to have control over their reproductive choices whether they wish to contracept or conceive.

What experiences did you have that confirmed medicine was the right career for you?

I worked in an ER as a medical scribe during college. This position gave me first hand experience interviewing patients and working together with a cadre of practitioners including nurse practitioners, physician assistants, and doctors.

What made you decide to apply to medical school?

I attended a Medical Students for Choice conference during graduate school. During the keynote address, the speaker asked a rhetorical question regarding future abortion providers sitting in the room, "If not you, who?" I sat silently and did not answer but I knew at that moment that I would be a physician.

Did anyone encourage or discourage you from applying to medical school?

As the first person in my family to graduate high school and pursue higher education, I did not have a lot of familial support. My parents thought that my goals were too lofty and that I should be more realistic. This was further exacerbated when I did not gain acceptance on my first attempt. I developed

nurturing relationships with high school teachers, college professors, and my friends' parents. I went on to apply to medical school three times and then deferred to complete research before matriculating.

### Did you have any fears going into medical school?

Having first pursued training in public health as a reproductive biologist, I often wondered if medicine was the right choice. Ultimately, I decided that going to the frontline advocating for patients and providing services was the most effective way to enact change.

### Please describe your participation in extra-curricular activities, volunteer work, research, or study-abroad opportunities during medical school or residency.

I participated in AMSA's Sexual Health Scholars program during my first year, began serving on the international board of directors of the nonprofit Medical Students for Choice in my second year, and I was a teaching assistant for an online course for the University of California San Francisco during my third year. In my fourth year, I completed a subinternship in aerospace medicine with NASA at the Johnson Space Center in Houston. During all four years, I wrote letters to the editor for the local newspaper and served as a clinic escort to bring patients in and out of a local women's health clinic.

### What obstacles did you overcome in your medical school journey?

Because medicine requires a substantial amount of rote memorization I found it very difficult to engage with the material. I also found that, for me, the traditional classroom setting was not a conducive learning environment for that type of material. I thought that talking through the material with a classmate was the best way for me to get through the material effectively.

### What makes your story unique?

Having an interest in space exploration and reproductive health prior to medical school made the intersection of aerospace medicine and gynecology a natural convergence. Specifically, I am interested in spaceflight contraception management and investigating the role of fertility preservation for astronauts journeying through unprecedented levels of cosmic radiation during deep space missions.

### What did you enjoy most about medical school?

4<sup>th</sup> year subinternships (Sub-I). The flexibility of my fourth year curriculum let me not only complete a sub-I in family planning and work at the local Planned Parenthood, but also afforded me the opportunities to travel. I had always wanted to work in a Kaiser health system and was able to finally do so at the San Francisco location. There I was exposed to a transgender health clinic and was able to scrub in on gender reassignment cases in addition to the standard gynecological cases. I also returned to Johns Hopkins and worked with some of my former labmates/mentors that also had clinical positions in the department of Reproductive Endocrinology & Infertility. Lastly, I was able to work at NASA and get exposed to the basics of aerospace medicine and learn about the necessary training to be a flight surgeon for the astronaut corps.

Are you a member of a unique demographic? If so, please describe how that shaped your medical school experience.

Medicine is often a conservative environment and that made being an openly gay student challenging at times. I found support and mentorship through the Gay & Lesbian Medical Association. Participating in national positions through the American Medical Student Association and Medical Students for Choice also exposed me to students from even more diverse backgrounds than I found at my home institution.

### Why did you choose your specialty?

I have always been drawn to addressing stigmas that our patients face. This is particularly true in the area of sexual health. In regard to aerospace gynecology, I knew that I wanted a field that involved problem solving and critical thinking beyond the traditional hospital walls. A career with NASA promises unique challenges and constant technological innovation as we prepare to travel farther into the solar system than ever before.

### What advice would you give to someone interested in pursuing a career track similar to yours?

Reach out and network with likeminded individuals who have pursued similar paths. You'll be surprised who you can develop mentoring relations with just by demonstrating your passion for a particular topic. I continue to foster relationships that I made during graduate school and have stayed in touch with the former director of the Bill and Melinda Gates Institute for Population & Reproductive Health, Dr. Amy Tsui, as well as Dr. Anne Burke, Hopkins' director of their family planning fellowship. During medical school, I became close to the Virginia Health Commissioner as well as the dean/CEO of my hospital because of my work with advocacy. Similarly, through Medical Students for Choice I was able to meet two of my heroes: Cecile Richards and Dr. Willie Parker.

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