

Scrubs are the uniform of choice for this future Army physician

Wearing blue scrubs, third year medical student Elizabeth Puntenney holds out her hands in the operating room for a colleague to clip on her gloves. Her face covered by surgical mask and visor, she prepares to spend a few hours observing and learning during another day in her surgical rotation.

Blending in with the nurses, surgeon, anesthesiologist and techs, the Georgetown medical school student doesn't require or receive a salute today. Most don't know she is a Second Lieutenant in the U.S. Army Reserve.

Puntenney is part of a long and distinguished tradition in American medicine – a student receiving exceptional medical training from one of the nation's best medical schools through an Army scholarship.

She is one of hundreds of medical school students across the country who plan to become part of the U.S. Army. Through the Health Professionals Scholarship Program (HPSP), Puntenney has the full cost of tuition to Georgetown's medical school covered, as well as funding for the cost of books and a monthly stipend to assist with living expenses.

Unless they ask, most of her friends and fellow students have no idea Puntenney is an Army Officer. She goes about her day and her schooling like every other student. However, she has gone through Officer's Basic Training and she will complete her residency in one of the many Army health care facilities across the country, depending on her specialty.

"I applied for HPSP immediately after receiving my first acceptance to a medical school. Just like some students come in knowing they want to be an orthopedic surgeon, I knew I was interested in military medicine," Puntenney said.

Unlike her classmates who may face hundreds of thousands of dollars of debt after finishing medical school, Puntenney found the HPSP scholarship to be an attractive way to address her concerns about tuition costs and living expenses in the Georgetown area. Aside from the financial benefits of the Army scholarship, her commitment to her country has always been strong.



Second Lieutenant and medical student Elizabeth Puntenney at Officer Basic Leadership Course

Hailing from Prescott, Ariz., Puntenney gained knowledge of military life from her two grandfathers, both of whom retired as lieutenant colonels. One grandfather, Clifford Willey, served for more than 25 years as a pilot in the Air Force, joining after witnessing the attack on Pearl Harbor. The other, William Puntenney, served in the Army in World War II and landed on Omaha Beach on D-Day.

"They both passed on an appreciation of patriotism and willingness to persevere," she explained. "I always had a sense of how military service helped shape them into the great men that they were."

Georgetown has a long history of supporting military medicine. Each year, a handful of Georgetown medical students accept and receive HPSP scholarships. Throughout the year, Army recruiters arrive on campus to provide lunch and information to prospective students who may be thinking about military careers.

"Dr. Steven Mitchell, the dean of the medical school, has long been a proponent of our program," explained Capt. Ron Poynter, commander of the U.S. Army Medical Recruiting Company in Elkridge, MD. "Every year, we hold a ceremony where HPSP students are commissioned as officers into the Army. Dr. Mitchell has not only allowed us to hold these ceremonies on campus, he has taken part in them himself. Having him play such an active role gives the students a sense that

they have made a great decision for themselves and for their country.”

Poynter explained that Punttenney’s exceptional medical training from Georgetown will dovetail with her military training. “She is receiving one of the best medical

school trainings anywhere in the country, honing her critical thinking and diagnostics skills, while also sharpening her patient care skills. In the Army, she will combine that with organizational and operational skill training that will prepare her for any number of assignments,” Poynter said.

The HPSP scholarship and the Army seemed a natural fit for Punttenney. At the time she was accepted, she drew on the experience of her brother James “Will” Punttenney, a West Point Cadet, to help her make her decision.

“His ups and downs really pulled back the curtain to allow me to see the realities of a service commitment in the modern Army,” Punttenney said. “I am very glad I chose Army medicine because there seems to be a greater variety of specialties and residency slots at a more medical centers compared to other branches of the military.”

Currently, Punttenney is interested in the field of diagnostic radiology. This summer she plans to apply for a diagnostic radiology clerkship program and is fascinated by the scope of radiologic training and the ability to see the cause of a patient’s symptoms.

“I think it is amazing to watch a trained radiologist pick up and interpret findings that would have gone unnoticed by anyone else when looking at the same image,” she explained. She also pointed to radiology’s changing role, from X-ray technology to nuclear medicine, magnetic resonance imaging and interventional radiology, all of which she could see herself doing on a daily basis.

Always the adventurous type, Punttenney views her medical school and Army journey with the same attitude. She says there are twists and turns with each venture that were never anticipated. But she emphasized that neither should be taken lightly. Just as she researched where she wanted to go to medical school, Punttenney put in numerous hours of study into the Army scholarship plan. The HPSP scholarship was not just a means of paying for college for her, but a career choice.

Like most medical students, Punttenney is extremely bright and thoughtful. She carefully considered her career options and contacted an Army Medical Recruiter about the scholarship. She had done her due diligence online and knew the commitment that would await her after residency (normally one year of active duty for every year of residency training). While much of the Army world was unknown to her, she has gotten to know other HPSP students at Georgetown through their time training together.

Most of Punttenney’s fellow classmates are unfamiliar with the HPSP scholarship program and only a few know she is in the Army. She said students like her get a lot of questions including “what does the military pay for?” and “how many years do you owe?”

“The quick answers are: all required tuition and textbooks are paid and we get a \$1,900 monthly stipend. As far as years go, the ballpark figure is that you end up owing as many years active duty as years of residency completed,” she said.

Focusing on a radiology clerkship during the summer of 2008 and contemplating her options for residency training, Punttenney is excited about her options and her future. She has experienced the best of both the civilian and military world of medicine. Not only has she had an exceptional medical school experience at Georgetown, but she has completed clerkships in family and internal medicine through Army medical centers. Those experiences have helped affirm her decision and given her peace of mind.

Deciding to join the Army during an active conflict was a daunting decision, but one that Punttenney doesn’t regret. After carefully considering the risks, she determined that the benefits outweighed the potential challenges of being an active duty Medical Officer. Like many of her HPSP scholarship colleagues, she sees ample opportunities to grow and expand her medical knowledge.