

Erica D. Taylor

Clinical Research Training Program Fellow 2004-2005

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My name is Erica Taylor and I participated in the Clinical Research Training Program (CRTP) in 2004-2005. I was born and raised in Reston, Virginia, a town situated approximately 20 miles outside of the District of Columbia. I graduated from Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology. I then earned a B.S. degree in Engineering Science from the University of Virginia, with a minor in Biomedical Engineering. I am currently in my fourth year of medical school at Duke University School of Medicine.

I first heard about the CRTP through another Duke medical student who had been a fellow in the program. She had many marvelous things to say about the program, the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and life in Bethesda, Maryland. I then went to the Office of Student Affairs at Duke and read over a brochure for the program. The CRTP website was also a key source of information.

The clinical research project that I created for my CRTP year investigated relevant, yet underreported, musculoskeletal conditions present in overweight children and adolescents. It was a multi-dimensional cross-sectional analysis that incorporated data from medical charts, questionnaires, and radiographic images.

While orthopedic surgery has always been my primary career goal, I developed a sincere interest in public health and clinical research after completing multiple projects on the obesity epidemic during my clinical rotations in medical school. I was amazed by the number of serious co-morbidities that affected many of the patients I encountered in clinic and on the wards. Furthermore, it saddened me to see many of the same medical conditions on the rise in the pediatric population. Thus, my primary intention when I applied to CRTP was to come to the NIH and investigate pediatric obesity in some capacity. By designing my own project, I was able to tie this fascinating area of research to my interest in orthopedics. Since there were multiple components to my research project, I certainly had a variety of work-days, which was wonderful. On data collection days, lab work consisted of measuring lower extremity alignment on radiographic images, gathering and organizing past medical history information, running statistics and even occasionally aliquoting DNA samples. On more clinic-oriented days, my work activities included carefully consenting adolescents and their parents for clinical trial participation. Perhaps the most exciting part of my work week, I also helped run the weekly weight-loss group for the obese study participants. This included monitoring weight changes, completing 30 minutes of physical activity with the teens in the NIH gym, and escorting them to behavior modification classes facilitated by a dietician and

clinical psychologist. The extraordinary interaction I was able to have with the children throughout the year was definitely the heart of my CRTP experience.

My experience as a CRTP fellow at the NIH gave me wide exposure to other areas of leadership that I could pursue as an academic physician, such a variety of positions in health policy, and careers in epidemiology. I learned that for today's physician, the sky is the limit!

I am adamantly pursuing a career in pediatric orthopedic surgery. As a product of a long lineage of educators, I am devoted to continuing the tradition of educating others in the realm of academic medicine, and I certainly envision returning to the NIH in the future to pursue a research career in the intramural program. There are so many facets of the NIH that I have yet to explore.

From the very first week I arrived, my mentor gave me an appropriate amount of independence to design, create, and follow-through with my own clinical research project, which was a learning opportunity not every research student is given. Throughout the year, he pushed me to prove that my approaches were practical, and that the results of my work would be clinically applicable. He also provided me with the flexibility to pursue the additional guidance of experts in other specialties. Developing my own project helped me to realize my strengths as a future physician-scientist.

I was very fortunate to have a mentor with whom I easily had contact on a daily basis and who truly valued the contributions of each member of the group. I knew that I could always walk around the corner to my mentor's office whenever I had a question or needed guidance. In addition, my mentor and I met one-on-one on a weekly basis to review the work I had accomplished the previous week, the goals for the current week, and any issues or problems that I may have encountered. This definitely kept both of us on track for ensuring that my CRTP experience was optimal and productive.

The NIH campus is amazingly huge! At any moment of the day, one could find a distinguished seminar series, scientific meeting, or conference in the works. To say that the research being conducted here is diverse is a severe understatement. There were several instances in which I passed by a group of physician-scientists speaking to each other in a foreign language. Being a part of the NIH community was certainly an unparalleled experience that brought researchers of all backgrounds together to achieve the advancement of healthcare discovery.

In addition to endless acquisition of research knowledge, I also enjoy exploring new approaches to physical fitness, sharpening my piano skills, and spending quality time with family and friends.