Charting a Course to Medical School:
The AMSA Map for Success

Welcome to "Charting A Course to Medical School: The AMSA Map for Success." Written by AMSA members, this guide offers help straight from students who have followed the same route you are facing now. They've learned from their experiences, and now they're sharing their wisdom with you. We hope that you find the information contained in this online guide helpful, and we wish you the best of luck in your journey to medical school.

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Introduction

Congratulations! You have chosen to pursue a career that is both challenging and rewarding -- the range of duties a physician can fulfill is endless. From the researcher who doggedly pursues a cure for cancer to the primary care physician who still makes house calls, all physicians share a common bond, promoting the health and well-being of people. This can be done through treating disease, preventing illness, and even finding a drug which will successfully combat HIV. Yet, every aspect of medicine displays the single purpose of caring for the physical and emotional health of people.

What does it take to become a doctor? The most important trait is a commitment to medicine, to individuals, and to society. Dedication, determination, and devotion to helping people through medicine are of paramount importance. Without these, your training and resulting career will not be very enjoyable or rewarding.

As you embark on your journey to become a physician, remember that you are a physician-in-training the day you decide to pursue medicine. Although formal training will not begin until medical school, personal traits such as character development and leadership ability can be honed even before entering medical school. As a clinician, your ability to reach out to patients, gain their trust, and effectively
communicate are of critical importance. The time and financial commitment involved in this pursuit can be staggering. Most students accumulate a large amount of debt while in medical school. This debt, coupled with four years of training and a variable number of years spent in residency training, can seem daunting. Yet with confidence and motivation, these will appear only secondary in importance when you consider what you are gaining in the long run. The time and financial commitment can be viewed as an investment in your future.

When applying to medical school, first understand that there are a lot of untrue myths about applying to medical school. For example, you do not have to be a "super student" in order to gain acceptance. You do not have to be president of a fraternity or sorority, play varsity sports, or be an officer in five other organizations to get in, nor do you have to score in the 90th percentile on the MCAT. (Surprised?) This handbook is intended to dispel a lot of these myths which many pre-medical students may encounter. It will separate what "they" say from what actually happens. The handbook also addresses areas that are not widely discussed, if at all, in many other resources. This is particularly true for non-traditional students, lesbian, gay, and bisexual students, minority students, and disabled students. Each group has its own concerns which will be addressed herein.

As you read through this online guide, realize that there is a myriad of aspects that medical schools consider in an applicant. Some can be seen on a piece of paper, like your grades and MCAT scores. Other aspects such as dedication and compassion cannot be tabulated in an objective manner.

This guide is written by students for students. In our common goal to care for people, we have tried to make the road that lies ahead of you just a little easier to travel.

Through the Years

Information for:

- Freshman Year
- Sophomore Year
- Junior Year
- Senior Year

Welcome, Freshmen!

If you are a freshman reading this booklet, then we must offer our congratulations. By taking the time now to start thinking about how you are going to get into medical school, you are a step ahead of most other freshmen. If you're not reading this until your sophomore, junior, senior, or post-bac years, don't worry. There have been many others who didn't decide to start pursuing medicine until "late," and many of those are today called "doctors."

Perhaps the most important thing to remember during your freshman year is: don't panic. I know, I know, easier said than done. Making a successful transition to college is definitely not an easy task. You may have to take care of all of the following: living on your own for the first time, making new friends, learning a new town, dealing with cafeteria food, and much more. And, on top of all that, your parents (and medical schools) expect you to make good grades! But, as I said before, don't panic. Making the adjustment is tough, but it can be done.
So what should you be doing during your freshman year to help prepare you for medical school? Well, you should obviously start taking some of the required classes for medical school. Almost all medical schools will require the following:

- 1 year of general chemistry with lab
- 1 year of biology with lab
- 1 year of organic chemistry with lab
- 1 year of physics with lab
- 1 year of mathematics (most want at least 1 semester to be calculus)
- 1 year of English (most want some writing course)

The timeline for taking these depends on a number of factors: your major (engineers should definitely take physics as early as possible), your school (check to see when your school offers part a of 2-semester courses), and your interests and skills. As a general rule, the sooner you get these core courses out of the way, the better (but don’t take more than 2 of these rigorous basic science courses at once!). Also, for those of you with AP credits, most schools will not accept AP credit for the basic science courses: general chemistry, biology, organic chemistry, and physics. Furthermore, the class requirements vary from medical school to medical school. Check the latest edition of the AAMC’s “Medical School Admission Requirements” to make sure that you will at least be eligible to apply to the schools you want. Also, for your first year, don’t overdo things. Remember, you’ve got a lot to do in order to make a good adjustment to being a college student. Save the heavy course loads for your sophomore and junior years, and try to take between 12-14 hours each semester in your first year.

Now that you’ve taken care of what to do inside the classroom, what should you do outside of it? As important as grades are, they are not everything. You’re in your college years, a time that many call "the best years of my life." So, get involved in your school and community! Your freshman year is a time for you to start looking at all of the organizations your school has to offer and decide which ones interest you the most. Medical schools aren’t interested in the quantity of activities you’re in, but rather the quality. And when I talk about quality, I mean your dedication and level of involvement. Choose organizations or activities that YOU want to do, not ones you think medical schools want you to do. Trust me: medical schools will be able to tell the difference. Also, during the second semester of your freshman year, look for ways to step up your level of involvement in those organizations. Perhaps you’d make a great officer?

**Sophomores: Wise Fools**

So, you made it through your freshman year and you still think medicine is for you. What do you do now? Well, make sure you're still on track to get all the core courses taken care of. They don't need to be finished by the end of your sophomore year, but they should definitely be done by the time you take the MCAT. Also, I hope that you were able to develop some good study habits during your freshman year. For many, the sophomore and junior years are by far the hardest years of college. There’s no universal "best way" to study; you have to find out what works best for you. Do you like to study in groups or alone? Do flashcards help you? Do you do better work during the day or at night? These are some of the questions that you must answer for yourself. As far as when to study, we'd highly recommend that you NOT get into the habit of cramming. Sure, it might help you for that one test. But cramming doesn’t help you remember things in the long-term, and your long-term memory becomes of critical importance during final exams, which often constitute as much as 50% of your grade. Also, if there are copies of old tests available, by all means use them. Just like you, professors can often fall into
the trap of being lazy. Some may think, "Why write an entirely new exam when I can just change around
the old one?" Professors know that students are lazy, too. Don't be like most other students! Take the
time to go to the library and look up the old exams. It will be well worth your time.

If you haven't chosen your major by the spring of your sophomore year, be sure to take care of that.
There are many theories out there concerning which majors are the best ones for medical school. On
the one hand, majoring in a science may help you in your first 2 years of medical school, but you'll look
like many other premedical students when you're applying. On the other hand, not majoring in a science
may help separate you from the pack while applying, but you may be at a disadvantage while in medical
school. So, what should you major in? Our advice is simple: forget about what you think a medical
school wants you to major in, and instead major in whatever you're most interested in. Obviously,
preameds are interested in science, so many major in one of the sciences. However, if you love history,
why not major in history? After all, once you enter medical school, there won't be much time for classes
covering the humanities.

Another academic note we'd like to touch upon is your relations with your professors. Almost all
professors hold office hours. Please, by all means, take advantage of that. If you don't understand a
concept, visit your professor. If you want to find out more about a certain topic, visit your professor. We
cannot stress how important it is to develop a good relationship with your professors. Why? 1) If your
grade is on the borderline between 2 grades, a professor is more likely to "bump up" your grade if
he/she knows that you've been working hard; 2) When it comes time for you to ask for
recommendations, it's much better to have a professor that knows you write a letter; and 3) You might
just realize that your professor can be a pretty cool person.

As far as extracurriculars during your sophomore year, try not to spread yourself too thin. Remember to
get a large amount of involvement in just a few activities, i.e. quality, not quantity. Also, try and get
some leadership experience and become an officer in 1 or 2 activities.

If you are thinking about applying to an osteopathic medical school, now is the time to start
volunteering for a D.O. Most D.O. schools require a letter of recommendation from a D.O.

**Juniors: Time to get on the ball**
Whew! You're halfway through your undergraduate coursework, and you're still standing. Good job! For
the first semester of your junior year, just continue what you did your sophomore year. Remember to
keep those grades up, because your junior year grades are the last grades that go to AMCAS (application
service for allopathic schools) and ACOMAS (application service for osteopathic schools). However,
during the second semester of your junior year, the application process for medical schools kicks into
high gear. Be sure to stay organized and focused, and follow the timeline provided to stay on top of
things.

**Seniors: Almost done!**
You should know by now how to handle your coursework and your extracurricular activities. Don't stop
striving for good grades and participating in clubs just because your applications have already been sent
out. After all, you didn't go to college just to get into medical school, did you? Be sure to follow the
timeline in this booklet to stay on track. And, finally, relax and enjoy your senior year. You've earned it!
Timeline

The following is a guideline for the "traditional" pre-medical student, and this schedule will most certainly change depending on your school. You should check with the health professions advisor at your school to see what the recommended schedule is for you. Also, you should check specific requirements for schools that you are especially interested in, since requirements may vary slightly. As long as you fulfill the class requirements before you take the MCAT, you should be okay. Finally, please realize that this schedule includes only the core classes that almost all medical schools want to see. Beyond these classes, it doesn't really matter what classes you take, so feel free to take whatever interests you the most.

Schedule for:

Freshman Year | Sophomore Year | Junior Year | Senior Year

Freshmen:

First Term:

- General Biology I + lab
- General Chemistry I + lab
- Calculus I, if required
- Electives (a few easy required general education courses)

Second Term:

- General Biology II + lab
- General Chemistry II + lab
- Calculus II
- Electives

All Year: Get involved outside of academics, join clubs and organizations (Join your local AMSA pre-med chapter, or start a chapter at your school!)

Sophomores:

First Term:

- Organic Chemistry I + lab
- English
- Classes for your major

Second Term:

- Organic Chemistry II + lab
- English
- Classes for your major
• Get information about medical schools that interest you.

All year: Start thinking about leadership positions in clubs. Be sure to start building good relations with your professors.

**Juniors:**

**First Term:**
• Physics I + lab
• More classes for your major
• Electives

**Second Term:**
• Physics II + lab

**February**
• Request AMCAS and ACOMAS applications
• Register for the MCAT
• Begin studying for MCAT (if you haven't done so already!)
• Start thinking about which med schools you'd like to apply to

**Mid-March**
• Be sure to register for MCAT in time
• Start asking for letters of recommendation
• If you did any coursework at any schools other than your current institution, you can start submitting transcripts from those schools to AMCAS and ACOMAS at this time

**Mid-April**
• Take the MCAT

**May**
• Start working on your applications (start earlier than this if possible, especially on your personal statement)
• If you wish to apply for an AMCAS or ACOMAS fee waiver, applications are accepted beginning May 15.

**June**
• Submit your applications! Since most schools use rolling admissions policies, the earlier the better. Do NOT put this off.
Seniors:

July-December

- Complete and return your secondary applications as you receive them. Some may come before this time, some may even come after.
- Start preparing for your interviews

September-February

- Most interviews occur during this time. Make sure you are prepared.

March-May 15

- If you have the luxury, take some time to choose wisely about which school to attend
- Start seriously thinking about how you're going to pay for medical school.

May 15

- By this date, if you have been accepted at more than one school, you must choose just one school, and drop all others.

May-September

- During this time many schools will try to complete their medical school class by inviting students off of their waitlist. If you are still interested in any schools at which you are waitlisted, by all means let them know!

If the cards didn't fall your way this year, regroup and plan a strategy for next year. Be sure to see our section on reapplying as well.

Extracurricular Activities

You might ask yourself, "What does it take to become a doctor?" It takes intellectual and heart-rending endurance, the desire and ability to relate to people effectively, and especially, the competence to think logically and to use common sense. Medical schools look for evidence that demonstrates traits such as leadership, maturity, determination, inquisitiveness, and a demonstrated interest and knowledge about what medicine encompasses. This can be accomplished, in part, by having experience in a health care setting, by speaking with health care professionals who have been through it, or by getting exposure to research at the undergraduate level. Not only will involvement in extracurricular activities show your determination, it will also give you a realistic view of the medical field, enabling you to observe its shortcomings, demands, and rewards first-hand.

If you are unable to volunteer or find a health-related job at your local hospital or clinic, there are other alternatives. Working, playing sports, or even playing a musical instrument will demonstrate your commitment to a particular activity. These activities may take large amounts of time and may help explain your lack of involvement or enthusiasm elsewhere.
Many college students who have no other choice but to work in order to pay their expenses may find their outside employment a valuable experience and a possible source of recommendation. Nevertheless, it is important that pre-medical students maintain decent grade point averages. Outside employment is extremely time-consuming, especially for students who are already swamped with heavy course loads. This may lead to a lack of studying which will undoubtedly lead to lower grades. Many pre-professional advisors suggest that taking a semester off is often a good idea for those who have to work through school. On the other hand, many students actually find it easier to perform well in school while working a little every week; they find it gives them more structure -- that they can schedule their time more efficiently when they are forced to do so.

There is no doubt that pre-medical students face high degrees of stress, and many students turn to sports as a means of alleviating it. Participation in team sports in particular may exhibit your ability to cooperate with others (a very important trait for a physician).

While the personal and social traits that medical school admission committees seek in prospective applicants are difficult to measure, a display of devotion will definitely be beneficial and may increase your chances of being accepted to medical school. Nonetheless, it is crucial to point out that extracurricular involvement will not make up for low grades or low entrance exam scores.

It is also important to remember that you should be able to develop your interests outside of medicine. Book knowledge is not the only key to becoming a good physician -- communication skills, energy, and enthusiasm are also of great importance. Through extracurricular activities, you have the opportunity to develop these skills while pursuing interests which you truly enjoy.

A FEW TIPS

• Pre-medical Access to Clinical Experience (PACE)
  http://www.amsa.org/premeds/
  This guide outlines the most effective methods for securing a medically challenging patient contact experiences before medical school.

• Begin volunteering or shadowing physicians as soon as possible. Medical school admissions committees like applicants who know what is in store for them and who know what the profession is really like. Remember: most D.O. schools require a letter from a D.O. Letters from M.D.s are not accepted in place of a letter from a D.O. For students applying to allopathic medical schools, a letter from an M.D. that you shadowed can really help you out, too. A letter from a doctor who's simply a relative or a friend of the family will not get you really far.

• If working will make your grades suffer and you can avoid working while going to school, then do so. If you must work, try to get a job in a medical setting.

• Get involved in things you enjoy. There is a great deal more to education than books.

• For your extracurricular activities, quality matters, not quantity. Pick a few activities that you like and get really involved in them, instead of spreading yourself too thin.
MCAT

The Medical College Admission Test, or MCAT, is offered twice a year, once in April and once in August. The MCAT is required by 98% of all medical schools; the other two percent of schools require other standardized tests. Applications are available through your school's health professions advisor, an office of measurement and evaluation (if your school has one), or directly through the American College Testing service. Beware: the MCAT is a rather expensive test. Fortunately, there is a fee reduction program for financially disadvantaged students.

What does the MCAT consist of?

The MCAT consists of four sections: physical sciences, biological sciences, verbal reasoning, and a writing sample. The testing period takes a total of approximately eight hours and is split up in the following way:

- Verbal Reasoning, 85 minutes
- Physical Sciences, 100 minutes
- 50% Physics
- 50% Chemistry
- Writing Sample, 60 minutes
- Biological Sciences, 100 minutes
- 75% Biology
- 25% Organic Chemistry

How much should I study?

No one can really answer this question, simply because it depends upon the individual in question. If you have completed the core requirements prior to the exam, it should be fresh in your mind and you should not have to spend an exorbitant amount of time re-learning. It may be a good idea to take a diagnostic test to see in what areas you should focus your review efforts.

How important are MCAT scores?

Generally, the admissions committees look at many things when considering applicants. For example, they look at academic records, recommendations, and extracurricular activities, in addition to MCAT scores. Ultimately, the importance of test scores is particular to each individual school.

Should I take the MCAT in the spring or summer?

If you have completed all of the core requirements by spring, then definitely take the test in the spring. However, if you will not have them completed until summer, you may be better off waiting until then. The key is that you should take the MCAT as soon after you have completed the required premedical courses (general chemistry, organic chemistry, physics, and biology). If you are applying to schools for early decision, however, then the spring test time is your only option. Also, remember that most schools have rolling admissions policies, so waiting until August before your senior year may put you at a big disadvantage, as your applications will not be complete until October at the earliest. By the way, if you will have finished all of the required courses by August before your junior year, you may want to
consider taking the MCAT at that time. This will give you a chance to retake the test the following April if necessary without falling behind in the application process.

**Should I take the MCAT twice?**

You should choose this option only if you did not perform up to expectations in your first testing. **DO NOT EVER TAKE THE MCAT FOR "PRACTICE".** Many schools count each MCAT you take, some will take your best, and some will take only the most recent -- it really varies from school to school. The MCAT registration booklet also advises students to take the test twice if there is a large discrepancy between your first score and your undergraduate grades. Are MCAT preparation courses necessary?

The preparation courses provide a structured schedule as well as practice tests. For those who prefer to study on their own (and save money), there are many good practice books available. These books usually contain several practice tests as well as an adequate review of the subjects covered by the MCAT. The important thing is to make a review schedule and stick to it. The MCAT preparation courses are there to provide structure, not to study for you. The preparation courses do not provide information that has not already been covered in your basic science courses.

**How do I get through the MCAT day?**

Get a good night's sleep. Relax. You have studied hard! Bring number two pencils, black pens (writing sample), and a sweater. You may also want to bring food to munch on during breaks.

**Applying**

So here you are... done with the MCAT, and probably feeling like a great deal of weight has been lifted off your shoulders. You are relieved, happy, and excited about what is about to happen next -- your application to medical school. Yes, in many ways, the worst is over, but that does not give you an excuse to let up now. In fact, you should be more vigilant than ever. You are about to make some very important decisions, decisions which will affect the rest of your life.

To help you understand this whole process, we've split up this section into five parts (note: we've given "Interviewing" it's own section since it's such an important part of the process):

- Choosing which type of doctor
- Selecting medical schools
- AMCAS, ACOMAS and secondary applications
- Personal Statements
- Letters of Recommendation
- Pre-professional Committees
- Tips on Applying

**Choosing which type of doctor**

There are two types of physicians in the United States. One is an M.D. (doctor of medicine) and the other is a D.O. (doctor of osteopathic medicine). So what is the difference?
A physician is one who has graduated from an accredited medical program and has fulfilled the prescribed internship/residency/specialty training program. D.O.s and M.D.s are alike in that they both utilize all scientifically accepted methods of diagnosis and treatment, including the use of drugs and surgery. The educational requirements are the same for both, and typically, both physicians are examined by the same state licensing board.

The real difference between D.O.s and M.D.s arise from the different point of view and emphasis taken by each. The D.O. recognizes that the musculoskeletal system comprises over 60% of body mass, and that all body systems, including the musculoskeletal system, are interdependent. The D.O. believes that emphasis on the relationship between body structure and organic function gives a broader base for the treatment of the patient as a whole. The D.O. uses structural diagnosis and manipulative therapy in addition to the forms of diagnosis and treatment which allopathic physicians use. The D.O. believes in the 'whole body concept,' and feels that an illness is not just concentrated in one area or system, but that the whole body is affected.

The American Osteopathic Association (AOA) places a greater emphasis on community-related medical treatment. This is reflected by the high percentage of D.O.s who enter primary care specialties. The AOA believes all patients should have the right to select the kind of health care they prefer.

It is important to realize that both D.O.s and M.D.s are physicians. They both can care for a patient's problems, but the fundamental perspectives from which they approach medicine are somewhat different.

Selecting Medical Schools

Where do I apply, and how do I know this medical school is for me?

Every year, the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) puts out an updated copy of Medical School Admission Requirements. The book contains valuable information regarding names, addresses, and locations of every allopathic medical school in the United States and Canada. It also contains data pertaining to every medical school, including GPA/MCAT score ranges associated with accepted students, class size, curriculum, requirements for entrance, selection factors, financial aid, class composition, tuition, et cetera. For students interested in osteopathic medical schools, there is a comparable book published by AACOM called the "Osteopathic Medical College Information Book."

With over 125 schools to choose from, how do you know which ten or so schools best suit your hopes, expectations, and qualifications? There are a number of ways that schools can be chosen. Examine the following factors:

1. **Curriculum**
   What are you interested in pursuing once in medical school? Do you want to learn mostly via traditional lectures (traditional curriculum), via classes focused on learning information arranged by organ systems (traditional systems-based learning), or by case studies of clinical problems (problem-based learning). Every medical school has a reputation for coursework or programs unique to itself.

2. **Class size/composition**
Do you want to be in a class of 200 students, 100 students, or even fewer students? What types of student have been making up the class in the past few years? What percentage are women or come from minority groups?

3. Location
Where do you want to be when you are studying anatomy, biochemistry, physiology, and need a break? Do you want to be somewhere cold? Warm? Rainy? Sunny? Or is there a particular state or city in which you would like to spend four or more years?

4. Tuition and financial aid (be sure to see the financial aid section)
Is there sufficient financial aid available? Will you be able to afford tuition, fees, and books? Are there good loan and grant programs available?

5. Cost of living
Even if you can afford tuition, will you be able to afford the necessities, including food, clothing, and housing?

6. Competitiveness
Do you just want to get through medical school, or do you want to excel among your peers? Do you want grades in your classes, or do you want to be on a pass/fail system? (Yes, many medical schools are pass/fail, and one school, Yale, has no grades!)

7. Reputation
It cannot be denied that some schools have established national recognition in particular areas of medicine. If you are already leaning toward a certain field, this may be something to consider.

8. Out-of-state acceptances
You may decide that you want to attend a medical school outside of your home state. This may be particularly true if you do not come from a state with many medical schools (e.g., Maine, Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho). Check the AAMC’s Medical School Admission Requirements for out-of-state acceptance rates and tuition (which may vary for in-state and out-of-state students).

9. Other
Is there anything else about a medical school that captures your interest (your great-grandfather graduated from there, et cetera)?

How many schools should I apply to?

This number is up to the individual, but applying to medical school is expensive. The average per student is usually about 10 schools.

AMCAS, ACOMAS and Secondary Applications

The American Medical College Application Service (AMCAS) is a non-profit central processing unit for applicants to participating allopathic medical schools, and AACOMAS is the comparable entity for osteopathic medical schools. Most medical schools participate in the AMCAS or AACOMAS application process, and they are rather efficient services. The application is only a four-page "academic
autobiography” that is sifted and sorted into a one-page sheet which is sent to all of the medical schools to which you wish to apply. For all of its benefits, the AMCAS or AACOMAS application process is expensive. There is a fee waiver program for financially disadvantaged applicants, but there is a separate application for a fee waiver, requests for which may be submitted beginning May 15 of each year.

The AMCAS and AACOMAS application packets contain an overwhelming amount of paperwork. There is an acknowledgement postcard (which is sent to you when they receive your application), designation forms, an application form, a code booklet, a GPA calculation sheet, a fee waiver request packet, an official transcript inventory form, a pre-addressed return envelope, and four transcript matching cards. There is also a 36-page instruction booklet which is reminiscent of registering for the MCAT. Letters of recommendation are not included in your AMCAS or AACOMAS application. They are sent with the secondary application. The only piece of personal datum, initially, is your personal essay.

The personal essay is one of the most important sections of the AMCAS or AACOMAS application. It allows you to demonstrate who you are by giving you an opportunity to explain your motivation to pursue medicine, or even to explain why your grades or MCAT scores were, perhaps, not so good. Whatever you decide to write about in your personal essay, remember that you want to express yourself in an honest, dedicated, and coherent manner.

The AMCAS and AACOMAS applications are usually available in mid-March and can be obtained either through your preprofessional advisor or directly through the services themselves. Or, you can choose to utilize AMCAS's electronic application (AMCAS-E) or AACOMAS's electronic application. Electronic applications have their advantages and disadvantages over the paper version, but we recommend that you at least give it a shot. It will save you a lot of paperwork, and you don’t have to mess with a typewriter! Check the resources section of this guide for more info.

The sooner you get your application in, the sooner medical schools will be able to evaluate your application. AMCAS and AACOMAS begin accepting applications June 1, and they begin accepting transcripts March 15. Both services suggest that you have transcripts sent to the application services (from all colleges that you have attended) prior to submitting your application so that your application can be processed more quickly. AMCAS and AACOMAS do not make any admissions decisions, and they do not advise applicants where to submit applications. Each participating school is totally autonomous in reaching its admissions decisions. AMCAS and AACOMAS only provide a central application processing service to your chosen schools. It is up to the individual schools to send you secondary applications, an interview invitation, and, hopefully, an acceptance letter. Remember, not all medical schools use the AMCAS or AACOMAS services. Check with the schools you would like to attend to determine their application procedures.

After AMCAS or AACOMAS receives your complete application, they will process it and send copies of it to all of your designated schools. They will also send you a transmittal notification. This notification is an exact replica of what the medical schools will receive. As soon as you receive the transmittal notification, check for any errors. Contact AMCAS or AACOMAS in writing immediately if you need to have something changed. If everything is correct, then AMCAS and AACOMAS have completed their jobs.

Although AMCAS and AACOMAS provide the primary applications to medical schools, the medical schools to which you are applying will themselves send you a secondary application. Each school will send you a secondary application which you are required to return along with an application fee in order
to be considered for an interview. The fee varies from school to school. Most schools will waive this fee if you were earlier granted an AMCAS or AACOMAS fee-waiver.

The secondary application is different from the AMCAS and AACOMAS applications in two major ways. This is where your letters of recommendation and more personal information are requested. For instance, they may ask you to explain your best and worst traits or why you chose to apply to that particular medical school. Warning: if you're lucky, secondary applications can start piling up quickly. Try to commit yourself to returning each secondary application you receive no later than 2 weeks after you receive it. Sticking to this goal will make your life much easier. Once you have completed and returned the secondary application, you can sit back, relax, and wait for your interview invitation.

Personal Statement

Completing your Medical School Application

- What is a personal statement?
- Who reads medical school applications?
- Why do I have to write about myself?
- Getting Started
- Dealing with the Blank White Page
- Questions to Ask Yourself Before you Write
- Personal Statement Format
- Revising
- Top 10 Rules to Write By
- Mistakes to Avoid with Your Personal Statement
- General Advice From the Professionals
- Sample Successful Personal Statements

What is a personal statement?

Medical school application requires two types of personal statements. As you write these statements, remember that this is your opportunity to describe who you are, in such a way that is not possible through your hard data, such as your MCAT score, GPA and college transcript.

1. The first personal statement is required by all schools and is available through the American Medical College Application Service. AMCAS requests a one page, 5,300 character essay and suggests applicants consider the following questions in their essays:

   - Why have you selected the field of medicine?
   - What motivates you to learn more about medicine?
   - What do you want medical schools to know about you that hasn't been disclosed in another section of the application?

In addition, you may want to include information such as:

   - Special hardships, challenges, or obstacles that may have influenced your educational pursuits
- Commentary on significant fluctuations in your academic record which are not explained elsewhere in your application

AMCAS website:  
http://www.aamc.org/students/amcas/start.htm

Other helpful links:  
http://www.amsa.org  
http://www.studentdoctor.net

2. You'll also be asked to write a personal statement for each of your medical school applications. Again, this is your opportunity to explain who you are as a human being, and an opportunity to elaborate on the information you provided in your AMCAS application. Be sure to avoid duplication of either the materials in your AMCAS data or the AMCAS personal statement. The more complete picture of yourself you can provide to the schools to which you apply, the better.

Techniques and tips that will help you write a unique, accurate, thorough and honest personal statement follow...have a look, and good luck!

Who reads medical school applications? Medical school application boards consist of both faculty and students. All medical schools are concerned with the student composition of each class and want to create a diverse student population—educational, economic, racial, and social diversity are all considered. You'll notice when you get to medical school that every student does not have the same background. Not everyone is a recent "traditional" college graduate with a science degree...because 21-year-old biology majors are not the only people who make good physicians.

Keep your audience in mind as you write your personal statements, always remembering that it is up to you to explain why you would be an important and necessary member in next year's matriculating class. Your enthusiasm about your own potential and the medical field are vital to both the profession of medicine and to entering medical school.

Why do I have to write about myself? Though technical skill and intellectual ability are important in medicine, how you treat other people and yourself still matter when you work with other medical professionals and when you're treating patients. In part, the way you articulate who you are both on paper and at your interviews will determine for the medical school application board how you will relate with patients and the medical teams you will work with in hospitals and clinics. Medicine is about treating other people...and treatment still includes personal interaction.

Getting Started

Note: The AMCAS website provides a thorough explanation for all that is required for its application. The following suggestions and advice refer to the personal statements required by applications to individual medical schools.
1) START EARLY - If you prepare your application early and give yourself time to work on it carefully and to proofread, your chances of writing a distinctive, professional essay increase dramatically. Give yourself a chance...don't procrastinate, and ask for help!

2) PREPARE YOUR MATERIALS - Before you sit down to write, do some preparation in order to avoid frustration during the actual writing process.

Have the following on hand:

- Application form
- Transcripts
- Résumés

Keeping them in front of you will make your job of writing much easier.

Make a list of important information:

- names and exact titles of former employers and supervisors
- titles of jobs you have held
- companies you have worked for
- dates of appropriate work or volunteer experiences
- duties involved

In this way, you will be able to refer to these materials while writing in order to include as much specific detail as possible.

Also have on hand your AMCAS application, which will include many details you won't want to duplicate unless required in the medical school application.

Dealing with the Blank White Page

1) Brainstorm

There's no need to launch into your essay without any preparation. If you create a solid outline and come up with something personal and worthwhile to write, completing this essay may even be fun. If you brainstorm by writing everything down, free form, you'll most likely fill a few pages before you get to whatever it is you really want to say. Don't get nervous in front of the blank page...here are some tips....

List your SKILLS and how you've DEMONSTRATED them.

- e.g. intuition in the lab, gifted with understanding elderly people, capable of managing many tasks in tandem, etc.

List your PERSONALITY traits.
• e.g. enthusiastic student, positive attitude, honest, loyal, hard-working

List MAJOR INFLUENCES and MENTORS in your life.

List your GOALS, short term and long term

Principles for writing:

• A unifying theme is central. Organize your essay around the theme rather than merely listing your accomplishments.
• Give good examples and explanations. Don't just list; explain how and why an experience or person had an effect on you. These details show your enthusiasm and dedication far more effectively than just saying that you care about something does.
• Help your reader understand how the information is important and demonstrates your potential for this kind of advanced study as well as the soundness of your reasons for pursuing it.
• Respond to the question(s). Follow instructions carefully.
• Cover your bases. Make sure that you've called attention to your successes and relevant experience and that you've explained any discrepancies in your record.

Questions to Ask Yourself Before you Write

• What's special, unique, distinctive, and/or impressive about you or your life story?
• What details of your life (personal or family problems, history, people or events that have shaped you or influenced your goals) might help the committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?
• When did you become interested in medicine and what have you learned about it (and about yourself) that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field? What insights have you gained?
• How have you learned about this field--through classes, readings, seminars, work or other experiences, or conversations with people already in the field?
• If you have worked a lot during your college years, what have you learned (leadership or managerial skills, for example), and how has that work contributed to your growth?
• What are your career goals?
• Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain (great grades but mediocre MCAT scores, for example, or a distinct upward pattern to your GPA if it was only average in the beginning)?
• Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships (for example, economic, familial, or physical) in your life?
• What personal characteristics (for example, integrity, compassion, persistence) do you possess that would improve your prospects for success in the field or profession? Is there a way to demonstrate or document that you have these characteristics?

• What skills (for example, leadership, communicative, analytical) do you possess?

• Why might you be a stronger candidate for medical school—and more successful and effective in the profession or field than other applicants?

• What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?

2) Write an Outline

After brainstorming, it is time to start researching and outlining.

Personal Statement Format

As mentioned before, the requirements for personal statements differ, but generally a personal statement includes certain information and can follow this format:

Introduction

Many personal statements begin with a catchy opening, often a distinctive personal example, as a way of gaining the reader's attention. From there you can connect the example to the actual medical school program for which you are applying. Mention the specific name of the program, as well as the degree you are seeking, in the first paragraph. This paragraph becomes the framework for the rest of the statement.

Experts advise NOT to begin with a quote written by someone else. This technique is overused, and unless you honestly read the quote everyday of your life and it has changed your life dramatically, you're wasting two lines of space where you could say something about yourself, instead of writing down what someone else has said.

Detailed Supporting Paragraphs

Subsequent paragraphs should address any specific questions from the application, which might deal with the strengths of the program, your own qualifications, your compatibility with the program, your long-term goals or some combination thereof. Each paragraph should be focused and should have a topic sentence that informs the reader of the paragraph's emphasis. You need to remember, however, that the examples from your experience must be relevant and should support your argument about your qualifications.
The middle section of your essay might detail your experience in your particular field, as well as some of your knowledge of the medical field. Be as specific as you can in relating what you know about the medical field and use the language professionals use in conveying this information. Refer to experiences (work, research, etc.), classes, conversations with people in the field, books you've read, seminars you've attended, or any other source of specific information about the career you want and why you're suited to it. Since you will have to select what you include in your statement, the choices you make are often an indication of your judgment.

Conclusion

Tie together the various issues that you have raised in the essay, and reiterate your interest in this specific program. You might also mention how degree is a step towards a long-term goal in a closing paragraph.

3.) Writing a First Draft

The following is a list of concerns that writers should keep in mind when writing a personal statement/application letter.

Answer the Question: A major problem for all writers can be the issue of actually answering the question being asked. For example, an application might want you to discuss the reason you are applying to a particular program. If you spend your entire essay or letter detailing your qualifications with no mention of what attracted you to the field, your statement will probably not be successful. To avoid this problem, read the question or assignment carefully both as you prepare and again just prior to writing. Keep the question in front of you as you write, and refer to it often.

If you are applying to several schools, you may find questions in each application that are somewhat similar. Don't be tempted to use the same statement for all applications. It is important to answer each question being asked, and if slightly different answers are needed, you should write separate statements. In every case, be sure your answer fits the question being asked.

Avoid Unnecessary Duplication: Sometimes a writer has a tendency to repeat information in his or her personal statement that is already included in other parts of the application packet (resume, transcript, application form, etc.). For example, it is not necessary to mention your exact GPA or specific grades and course titles in your personal statement or application letter. It is more efficient and more effective to simply mention academic progress briefly ("I was on the Dean's List" or "I have taken numerous courses in the field of nutrition") and then move on to discuss appropriate work or volunteer experiences in more detail.

Make Your Statement Distinctive: Many writers want to make their personal statements unique or distinctive in some way as a means of distinguishing their application from the many others received by the program. One way to do this is to include at least one detailed example or anecdote that is specific to your own experience--perhaps a description of an important family member or personal moment that influenced your decision to pursue a particular career or degree. This strategy makes your statement distinctive and memorable.

Think in terms of showing or demonstrating through concrete experience. One of the worst things you can do is to bore the admissions committee. If your statement is fresh, lively, and different, you'll be
putting yourself ahead of the pack. If you distinguish yourself through your story, you will make yourself memorable.

Be Specific: Don't, for example, state that you would make an excellent doctor unless you can back it up with specific reasons. Your desire to become a physician should be logical, the result of specific experience that is described in your statement. Your application should emerge as the logical conclusion to your story.

Find an Angle: If you're like most people, your life story lacks drama, so figuring out a way to make it interesting becomes the big challenge. Finding an angle or a "hook" is vital.

Don't Include Some Subjects: There are certain things best left out of personal statements. For example, references to experiences or accomplishments in high school or earlier are generally not a good idea. Don't mention potentially controversial subjects (for example, controversial religious or political issues). Medical school selection is highly subjective and if one person on the application board dominates with an opinion, you may lose your chance with that school. Save your argument for later, after you get in.

Do Some Research, if needed: If a school wants to know why you're applying to it rather than another school, do some research to find out what sets your choice apart from other universities or programs. If the school setting would provide an important geographical or cultural change for you, this might be a factor to mention.

Avoid Clichés: A medical school applicant who writes that he is good at science and wants to help other people is not exactly expressing an original thought. Stay away from often-repeated or tired statements.

Consider the "I" Problem: This is a personal statement; using the first person pronoun "I" is acceptable. Writers often feel rather self-conscious about using first person excessively, either because they are modest or because they have learned to avoid first and second person ("you") in any type of formal writing. Yet in this type of writing, using first person is essential because it makes your prose lively. Using third person can result in a vague and overly wordy essay. While starting every sentence with "I" is not advisable, remember that you and your experiences are the subject of the essay.

Keep It Brief: Usually, personal statements are limited to 250-500 words or one typed page, so write concisely while still being detailed. Making sure that each paragraph is tightly focused on a single idea (one paragraph on the strengths of the program, one on your research experience, one on your extracurricular activities, etc.) helps keep the essay from becoming too long. Also, spending a little time working on word choice by utilizing a dictionary and a thesaurus and by including adjectives should result in less repetition and more precise writing.

4) Revising your Personal Statement

Because this piece of writing is designed to either get you an interview or a place in a graduate school program, it is vital that you allow yourself enough time to revise your piece of writing thoroughly. While some people work well under pressure, it is very important to leave yourself time to proofread and enlist the help of others to make sure that your essay is immaculate. Even giving time to let your mind rest one night can make a difference. What you've written the day before can look completely different the next morning, after a restful night's sleep.
Revision needs to occur on both the content level (did you address the question? is there enough detail?) and the sentence level (is the writing clear? are the mechanics and punctuation correct?). While tools such as spell-checks and grammar-checks are helpful during revision, they should not be used exclusively; you should read over your draft yourself and have others do so, again, checking for both content weaknesses and grammatical and spelling mistakes. Many admissions officers say that good written skills and command of correct use of language are important to them as they read these statements. Express yourself clearly and concisely. Adhere to stated word limits.

Helpful hints when revising

So your personal statement is returned to you filled with red marks and suggestions. Don't worry. You've given yourself enough time to consider the suggestions and to make necessary changes. Do not be afraid of or embarrassed by writing a second, third, fourth, or fifteenth draft. To avoid tiring your proofreaders, try a few tricks before handing over your drafts:

Use your computer spellcheck. Spelling, typographical, and grammatical errors are the written equivalent of having wrinkled clothes and bad breath on a job interview. They immediately suggest a lack of professionalism to a reader who has to make quick judgments about potentially hundreds of candidates.

Read your statement backwards, looking for misspelled words. Find homonyms and look them up, to make sure you are using the right word.

Do not use contractions.

Read through your statement with a highlighter in hand. Highlight each sentence or partial sentence that only you could say about your goals and life experiences. The more yellow, the better. Get rid of anything that is not specific to you, and work to provide enough details and personal anecdotes so that the majority of your statement can be highlighted in yellow.

Ask a completely fresh proofreader to read your final draft. Proofreaders do get tired, and can skip over mistakes if they've read your statement many times. Proofread your essay one last time, working through a checklist to make sure your completed all application questions and requirements.

Top 10 Rules to Write By DO strive for depth rather than breadth; narrow your focus to one or two themes, ideas, or experiences.

- DO tell the reader what no other applicant could honestly be able to say.
- DO answer the questions posed in the application.
- DO provide the reader with insight into what drives you--what makes you "tick."
- DO be yourself rather than pretending to be the ideal applicant.
- DO get creative and imaginative, particularly in your opening remarks.
- DO address the particular school's unique features that attract you.
- DO focus on the affirmative in the personal statement itself; consider using an addendum to explain deficiencies or blemishes.
• DO evaluate your experiences rather than merely recounting them.
• DO enlist others to proofread your essay for grammar, syntax, punctuation, word usage, and style.

Mistakes to Avoid with Your Personal Statement DON'T fail to recognize the importance of the personal statement.

• DON'T wait until just before your deadline to begin work on the statement(s).
• DON'T submit a personal statement that is more generic than personal.
• DON'T fill your statement with clichés.
• DON'T submit an essay that does not reflect the maturity and sophistication that might be expected.
• DON'T submit your essay with typos or grammatical errors.
• DON'T merely repeat information that you've provided elsewhere in your application.
• DON'T get on a soapbox and preach to the reader; while expressing your values and opinions are fine, avoid coming across as fanatical or extreme.
• DON'T talk about money as a motivating factor in your plans for the future.
• DON'T waste your personal statement opportunity with a hackneyed introduction or conclusion.
• DON'T use a gimmicky style or format.
• DON'T submit supplementary materials unless the admissions office requests them.

General Advice From the Professionals

Dr. Daniel R. Alonso
Associate Dean for Admissions
Cornell University Medical College

We look for some originality because nine out of ten essays leave you with a big yawn. "I like science, I like to help people and that's why I want to be a doctor." The common, uninteresting, and unoriginal statement is one that recounts the applicant's academic pursuits and basically repeats what is elsewhere in the application. You look for something different, something that will pique your interest and provide I some very unique insight that will make you pay some I notice to this person who is among so many other qualified applicants. If you're screening 5,500 applications over a four- or six-month period, you want to see something that's really interesting. I would simply say: Do it yourself, be careful, edit it, go through as many drafts as necessary. And more important than anything: be yourself. really show your personality. Tell us why you are unique, why we should admit you. The premise is that 9 out of 10 people who apply to medical school are very qualified. Don't under any circumstances insert handwritten work or an unfinished piece of writing. Do a professional job. I would consider it a mistake to attempt to cram in too much information, too many words. Use the space as judiciously as possible. Don't submit additional pages or use only 1/20th of the space provided.

John Herweg
Chairman, Committee on Admissions
Washington University School of Medicine
We are looking for a clear statement that indicates that the applicant can use the English language in a meaningful and effective fashion. We frankly look at spelling as well as typing (for errors both in grammar and composition). Most applicants use the statement to indicate their motivation for medicine, the duration of that motivation, extracurricular activities, and work experience. So those are some of the general things we are looking for in the Personal Comments section.

We also want applicants to personalize the statement, to tell us something about themselves that they think is worthy of sharing with us, something that makes them unique, different, and the type of medical student and future physician that we’re all looking for. What they have done in working with individuals—whether it’s serving as a checker or bagger at a grocery store or working with handicapped individuals or tutoring inner city kids—that shows they can relate to people and have they done it in an effective fashion? What the applicant should do in all respects is to depict why he or she is a unique individual and should be sought after. Of course, if they start every sentence on a whole page with "I," it gets to be a little bit too much.

Letters of Recommendation

How do you go about getting a letter of recommendation from a professor when you are only one student out of a class of a few hundred? That is one of the questions most commonly asked by pre-medical students coming from large undergraduate institutions. There are many ways to circumvent this situation and as you read on, please keep in mind that these are generalizations. Your particular situation and methods of obtaining letters of recommendation may be different.

In larger classes, approach the professor near the beginning of the term and explain to him or her your situation. That way they know who you are and may pay special attention to your performance in class. Also, make an effort to attend your professor’s office hours to ask questions about material that you do not understand. After the term is completed and your grade is determined, approach the professor again about writing a letter of recommendation on your behalf. Do not feel nervous or intimidated. You probably are not the first one who has asked him or her for a letter of recommendation. They will most likely ask for a copy of your CV (curriculum vitae) or resume, and maybe even a copy of your personal essay. Some professors like to sit down with you and ask you about your interests, activities, and, of course, your desire to become a physician. With all of this information, they will write a letter of recommendation for you and send it either to the medical school or the preprofessional committee. Needless to say, you must let them know where you want it sent.

In smaller classes, it is much easier for you to get to know a professor. In addition, the professor of a small class is much more likely to remember who you are and how you performed in class, i.e., participation, essays, questions, etc. They also may ask for a copy of your CV and personal essay because they may not know about your life outside of that particular class. In most cases, schools will also accept letters of recommendation from teaching assistants if they know you better than a professor of a certain class, that is, if a professor of the same class would not be able to give a comparable evaluation.

In addition, letters of recommendation can come from a large number of fields and are not restricted to academia. Although a few letters from the basic sciences are generally preferred, your other letters of recommendation can come from other departments, i.e., environmental sciences to English literature. Letters of recommendation can also be written by former (or present) employers and volunteer
supervisors. You should try to get letters of recommendation which highlight your strengths in several areas. Letters from friends, family members, and politicians are usually not a good idea.

When to ask for a letter of recommendation is up to you. Most students do not begin asking for letters until their junior year, when, traditionally, they begin the application process and may be in smaller, upper-level classes. Generally, it is better to ask a professor just after you have finished a course with him or her, especially in a large class, because they will most likely still remember who you are. Common sense will also tell you that it is important to ask for a letter of recommendation at a convenient time. When a professor has a grant proposal due the following week, or an employer has a major deadline to meet, they may not be very receptive to your requests.

**Also, here are a couple of tips to help you with your recommendations:**

When asking for a recommendation, ask "Can you write me a strong letter of recommendation for medical school?" Most recommenders will be straightforward with you, and you should obviously not ask for a recommendation for someone who can't answer "Yes" to this question.

Approximately 2 weeks after you ask for your recommendation, send your recommender a Thank-You letter. This should be done for 2 reasons: 1) It's the polite thing to do and 2) It may serve as a reminder to any recommender who may have been too busy lately to complete your recommendation.

***Check with your pre-professional committee and with the medical schools to ensure that your letters are being sent where they need to be sent when they need to be sent. It is YOUR responsibility to see that everything in your application is accurate and complete, not your premedical advisors' responsibility.***

Finally, letters of recommendation are just one of several facets that the admissions committee examines. Remember, if you choose to go through the service of the preprofessional committee, the letter of recommendation sent to the medical school will be a result of all of the letters that you have obtained. People who are most knowledgeable about your strengths, character, and commitment to medicine will most likely give you excellent letters of recommendation.

**Pre-Professional Committees**

Many undergraduate schools have a pre-professional committee in order to make the application process to medical school a little less cumbersome. Each school's procedures are a little different, but they all operate on the same general principles. The committee members, comprised of faculty in different departments and, perhaps, the pre-professional advisor, will review several items compiled in a pre-professional committee application. These include your overall grade point average, science grade point average, major grade point average, trends in grade patterns, honors courses (if any), personal essay, letters of recommendation, previous employment records, volunteer experience, and extracurricular activities. Some committees will also have a personal interview.

The committee members will then produce a single letter of recommendation, based on the application information and interview. Many schools will also rank you with ratings such as "outstanding, strong, competitive, above average, and average."
The pre-professional committee facilitates the application process by enabling you to send the composite recommendation to each medical school to which you are applying. This would be much easier than requesting an individual letter of recommendation from several people for every medical school to which you intend to apply.

Whether or not your school has a pre-professional committee, you are not required to use its services. It is designed to help make the application process to medical school smoother for you, but if you think that it would be more of a detriment than an assistance, no one can force you to use it. The decision is entirely yours. Do realize, however, that most medical schools prefer that you use your school's pre-professional committee if one in fact exists.

Contact your pre-professional advisor or undergraduate advisor if you are interested in learning more about the pre-professional committee.

Tips for Applying

**APPLY EARLY!**

And when we say early, we mean turning your AMCAS or ACOMAS in by the end of June (the earlier the better, but no need to FedEx it or anything and do NOT submit it before June 1st) and returning your secondaries within 2 weeks of receiving them. We know that you have heard this a million times before, but it is one of the most important elements of the application process.

Make sure to apply to a range of schools so that you can keep your options open and give yourself the best chance to get admitted to medical school.

Be prepared to spend a lot of money as the AMCAS and ACOMAS fees, individual school application fees, and interview costs (flights, hotels, meals, etc...) add up quickly. Some schools have hosting programs, but make sure to contact them early because they usually can't place you at the last minute.

Distinguish Yourself! Each school receives about 7000 applications for 100 spots. Try to make your application distinctive in order to separate yourself from the masses. Before they accept you, they have to remember you.

**APPLY EARLY!**

Some schools are non-AMCAS schools (see your MCAT registration booklet for a list). If you are interested in applying to these schools, write them for applications in the spring of your junior year, and, again, send them in as soon as possible.

At interviews, you will be grouped with people from all different schools, from Ivy League schools to schools you have never heard of. On your interview day, all of you are on equal playing field for the day, so don't be intimidated or condescending.

Show interest in the schools during your interviews, as schools want students who want them. If the school is your number one choice, be sure to tell them.
APPLY EARLY!

Practice questions with a friend before interviews. Be sure to be able to answer Why do you want to be a doctor? because they do ask this question. If you can't answer it, you're in trouble.

Send thank-you letters (but not gifts). They can't hurt you, and they definitely can help you. For the medical school, thank-you letters are definitely in order for your interviewer, as well as perhaps the person whose name appears on your interview invitation letter and anyone else at the school who may have helped you during your interview day. At your college, thank-you letters are in order for your recommenders (it may even serve as a sort of "reminder" to any of your recommenders who may be slow in submitting your recommendation) and your premedical advisor.

If you are waitlisted, be sure to continue to express your interest by calling your interviewers, writing letters to the admissions committee, and updating your application with any exciting news (e.g. awards, honor theses, academic transcripts, etc.)

Reapplying

The decision to apply to medical school forces many students to review their values and ethics. It is essential that students aspiring to be physicians have great dedication and motivation. With the arrival of rejection notices, it is expected that the self-confidence of students may begin to deteriorate. In this case, the dedication and motivation within the student must revive the self-confidence. Once the initial decision to apply to medical school has been made, tenacious students must pursue their dreams and reapply.

What if I don't get in the first time?

If you do not get accepted the first time that you apply to medical school, do not worry. It is NOT the end of the world. Take some time off, reevaluate your goals and make sure that becoming a physician is indeed the path you want to pursue. If you know medicine is for you, apply the following year. Medical schools often have so many excellent applicants that it is difficult for admissions committees to determine who will be in their entering class. Not being accepted does not necessarily reflect on your ability to become a physician. It is important for you to be confident about yourself and your desire to become a physician. When you reapply, your confidence and dedication will undoubtedly be even stronger.

In a study undertaken at the University of Texas Medical School at Houston (1), medical school performances of initially-rejected students were evaluated. In contrasting the initially accepted and initially rejected groups, academic and demographic factors made up only 28% of the group difference. The remaining 72% of the group difference was related to admissions committee preference. The procedure of admissions was standard, including faculty interview of applicants with final choice of acceptable students by the admissions committee. Approximately three-fourths of the difference can be attributed to a subjective impression created in the short period of one interview. By accepting fifty initially rejected pre-medical students, the study revealed that there were no meaningful differences in academic performance between initially-rejected and initially-accepted students. This observation implies that the traditional interview process may overlook many qualified applicants. "There are no
generally accepted criteria for identification of the 'good physicians,' nor are there valid predictions of effective performance." (2) With this in mind, it is possible for any pre-medical student who is absolutely sure that medicine is her or his future to reapply to a variety of schools with a spectrum of good qualities to find the school that can accommodate what the student has to offer.

If you thought there was a particular area in which you were weak, and this was the primary reason why you were not accepted, you may want to try to improve that area. For example, if your MCAT scores were very low, but all other aspects of your application were outstanding, you may want to consider retaking the MCATs. If your grades were low, then taking more challenging courses and doing well in them may help you to prove yourself academically.

**Studying at Foreign Medical Schools**

It is widely believed that pre-medical students apply to foreign medical schools only after being rejected from several U.S. schools. In a special article printed in the New England Journal of Medicine, analysts disprove this myth by revealing that fifty-five percent of a study group did not even apply to a U.S. medical school. A possible explanation is that substantial numbers of U.S. citizens study abroad because of the inability of the U.S. medical education system to accommodate them. Students who are interested in studying in a foreign medical school must take a test administered by the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG). The study shows that the number of U.S. students applying to foreign schools is steadily increasing. In fact, at least ten new medical schools with curricula designed to attract applicants from the U.S. opened in the Caribbean Island countries during the 1970s. The most popular foreign countries are Mexico, the Caribbean, Europe, the Philippines and Israel. There seems to be a fair chance of acceptance to a foreign medical school since the overall pass rate was 68% in 1982 for those U.S. students taking the ECFMG. Students looking at foreign medical schools, though, should be aware that getting into the residency of their choice may be tougher coming from a foreign medical school. Be sure to ask any foreign medical schools that you are interested in for some statistics regarding their students' success in "the match" (the process by which medical students are placed in residencies).

**Other Health Careers**

If you decide that being a physician is not what you really wanted to do, but you still want to be in a situation where you can care for people in a medical setting, there are still numerous opportunities available. You could follow the academic route, pursue a graduate degree, do research in the biomedical sciences and more! Careers in the clinical setting include public health, physical and occupational therapy, pharmacy, nutrition, nursing, and more. In addition, you could have a profound effect on health care through health policy, epidemiology, and public health. The possibilities are limitless.

Caring for people requires the cooperative efforts of persons in many different areas. Whether you are in a clinical or academic setting, the most important thing is that you are enjoying what you are doing and are dedicated toward improving the care of people in both sickness and health. A physician is only one of many who help to accomplish this goal.

Interviewing

The interview factors greatly in the decision making process of an admissions committee. It is important, though, to remember that it is not the only factor. Prior to an interview, the admissions committee only has statistics on a piece of paper to try to deduce what type of person is behind the facts. They use the interview to see if you possess the qualities necessary to become a successful physician.

Interview times range from half an hour to an hour, and often, students are given more than one interview at each school. At some schools, there are medical students who conduct interviews as well as faculty members. The interview day should not be treated lightly. Every activity, from the briefing to tours are part of your interview, and your reactions to everything will be taken into account.

In most cases, the interview is not meant to be a pressure cooker of facts and figures. You, the interviewee, are not on trial (although you may feel like it). The committee is trying to find out what kind of person you are, what your interests are, and what your motivations are. There are a few interviewers who will want to see how you react in stressful situations. When this happens, take a deep breath and think before you speak.

Some interviewers have a standard set of questions, but many questions will come from essays submitted with your application. Be honest in your essay, because the interviewer may ask you to expand on parts of it. If you exaggerate, it may become apparent to the interviewer. Your answers may then become the basis for further questions.

Political and health-related issues may come up, so it would be a good idea to be familiar with the news. (For links to potential issues in the news, be sure to check Today's Health and Medical News published on the AMSA website daily.) Make sure you are able to back up every answer, especially if you are taking a stand on a particular issue. If you do not know what the interviewer is talking about, it is better to be honest and say "I don't know," instead of dancing your way around an answer. Interviewers like to see that you are not too proud to admit that you do not know everything. Remember that the interviewer is usually more knowledgeable than you, and can tell if you are insincere or if you really know what you are talking about.

The interview does not have to be one-sided either. If you have questions in mind about relevant topics, especially about the school, ask them. This shows that you have really taken an interest in the school and also gives you time to relax. The interview also gives you an opportunity to discuss certain aspects of your application.

Remember, the interviewer must be able to present and defend your case to the rest of the admissions committee (either in person or in writing), so they must be able to learn much about you in a short amount of time.

What do interviewers look at?
• Nonverbal & verbal communication skills.
• Appearance & behavior.
• Use of vocabulary.
• Confidence level & honesty.
• Sincerity.

What should you do?

• Ask questions of the interviewer.
• Inquire about the school.
• Ask schools in the same area to coincide interview dates.
• Relax, be yourself.

Additional Resources

• InterviewFeedback.Com

Financial Aid

Financial aid is becoming more scarce today for students pursuing careers in the medical field. Some alternatives are employment, aid directly from a private source, federal scholarship programs and grants, and federal loans. The funds necessary for medical education today can no longer come directly from medical schools. Students must seek financial aid alternatives outside their college.

Aid granted directly from private sources is very difficult to find. Nevertheless, there are many foundations willing to support your education. The best scholarship foundations are those with large assets located within your state and particular area of interest. For example, some hospitals and other large health-care-providing organizations offer scholarships to students willing to commit a few years of service to their organization ("support-for-service" aid). Some states offer their own loan-repayment programs (largely support-for-service), but these vary widely from state to state.

Federal scholarship programs for medical students are very limited. There are two such programs: The Exceptional Financial Need Scholarship, which requires primary care commitment, and the Financial Assistance for Disadvantaged Health Professions Students Scholarship. In general, scholarships -- gift aid -- are largely need based only.

The National Health Service Corps (NHSC) Scholarship Program is an excellent program sponsored by the United States Department of Health and Human Services Public Health Service. The NHSC offers competitive support-for-service scholarships for tuition and educational fees, books, supplies, as well as a monthly stipend. All citizens enrolled in U.S. allopathic or osteopathic medical schools are eligible. Recipients are obligated to serve in physician shortage areas as assigned by the NHSC. The minimum service obligation for this program is two years. The NHSC gives preference to persons with primary care specialty goals and students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds (and/or come from primary care deficient areas). Highest priority is given to individuals who are former recipients of the NHSC Scholarship Program.
Most of the financial aid money available to medical students comes in the form of loans, e.g. the Federal Stafford Loan for students ($8,000 for two semesters), the Federal Supplemental Loan for students ($10,000), and the Health Education Assistance Loan (HEAL). Other types of loans include MEDLOANS, Health Professions Loans (primary care commitment only), and Loans for Disadvantaged Students.

To receive federal loans you must first find a private lender (all lenders are required to charge the same interest rate on federal loans) and consider the individual nuances of each type of loan in relation to your situation. For instance, although Federal Subsidized Stafford Loans are more difficult to qualify for, the government pays the straight eight percent interest for these loans as long as students do not work; the government does not do this with Federal Unsubsidized Loans.

The search for financial aid is very tedious. The first step is to find out whether your prospective medical college and/or university processes loans and other aid; the second is to seek them out for advice. Most schools have financial aid advisement centers and all schools have an office responsible for processing financial aid. Use both of these resources to create a realistic budget and find advice about locating the kind of aid most appropriate for your situation.

The links below are a good start in your search:

FastWeb (http://www.fastweb.com)
Free scholarship search. Enter in student specific information and keep receiving updates on scholarships offered nationwide.

FinAid (http://www.finaid.gov)
"The smart guide to Financial Aid". A "what's what" guide, good place to start with definitions and explanations.

US Department of Health and Human Services (http://www.hrsa.gov)
Various financial aid programs.

National Health Service Corps (http://nhsc.bhpr.hrsa.gov/)
Scholarship and loan programs in underserved areas of the US.

US Army (http://healthcare.goarmy.com/flindex.htm)
Career opportunities, scholarship and loan repayment programs.

Career opportunities, scholarship and loan repayment programs.

Career opportunities, scholarship and loan repayment programs.

National Institutes of Health (http://www.nih.gov/)
NIH Loan Repayment Programs (http://www.lrp.nih.gov/)

US Department of Health and Human Services: Indian Health Service / Division of Health Professions Support (http://www.ihs.gov/JobsCareerDevelop/DHPS/index.asp)
Loan repayments and scholarships


AAMC (http://www.aamc.org/) American Association of Medical Colleges: great section on financial planning.

Access Group (http://www.accessgroup.org/) Debt management for graduate and professional students.

Sallie Mae (http://www.salliema.com/) Lender, good info for students.

Credit Report Information
Equifax (http://www.equifax.com/) 
Experian (http://www.experian.com/) 
TransUnion (http://www.transunion.com/) 

AMSA Medical Student Debt Resources (http://www.amsa.org/AMSA/Homepage/About/Committees/StudentLife/StudentDebt.aspx)

Non-Traditional Applicants

The seemingly endless and arduous path to becoming a physician has been worn out by the traffic of a homogeneous mass of "traditional" students. These sojourners were the ones who attended college the four years immediately after graduating from high school and then proceeded to enter medical school without taking time off to explore other interests. Recently, many detours have attracted potentially traditional students off the worn path into new fields. These forerunners have charted new pathways leading to the legendary treasures of medical schools. Nowadays, medical schools have the luxury of choosing their classes from a high quality applicant pool, the members of which can offer diversity, special talents, new perspectives and character to any university. Becoming more and more accepted are these students who break from the pack and take a year or more off from academics to satisfy other pursuits, stay an extra year at their undergraduate institutions to obtain a more encompassing background, or work for a while to earn money before applying. Others trek back to academics after taking time off to raise a family, realizing their discontent with their current occupation, or even being initially rejected. Still others are nontraditional in the sense that they decide to cross the oceans and apply to foreign medical schools.

A Student's Experience

Pre-meds often wonder if it's a good idea to take a little time off from academics to reevaluate their commitment to medicine without it adversely affecting their application later. Other students consider it a risk to stay an extra semester or year at their undergraduate institutions in terms of both delaying their entrance into medical school and again affecting the application itself. Still others contemplate
working for a year after graduating to either gain experience, put to rest their doubts about the medical profession, or earn some money for the expensive schooling that lies ahead. First year Stanford University medical student Amy Alkire has had a pre-med experience that addresses all these situations. Amy finished her first two undergraduate years at Smith College and then took a semester off to work, earn money, and reevaluate her goals. Then she transferred to the University of California at Berkeley, staying for two and a half years, and after graduating, worked for a year in the Department of Radiology in the University of California at San Francisco. During this time, her interests ranged from writing to animal research to neurobiology.

Amy's semester off was spent working two jobs: the first as a retail salesperson at a local variety store and the second as a receptionist at a medical office. This time off from academics helped reinforce for her the value of education. Then, while she was at UC-Berkeley, she took advantage of the educational opportunities by taking at least one humanities class per semester and staying an extra semester to get a complete education. Amy remembers thinking as an undergrad when she took time off, "How is this going to affect what the medical schools thing of my application?" She said that everyone had a different opinion. At a certain point she decided that she had to do whatever she needed, and if the medical schools had a problem, then she would just keep applying.

Aside from giving her experience and valuable talent, Amy's position in the Department of Radiology at UCSF during the year immediately following her graduation served as the final decision-making step in committing her to the medical profession. She admits that getting such a position should not be counted on, but don't take the opportunity lightly if it's offered to you. She adds, "people just really need to feel comfortable doing whatever they need to do and they need to make the decisions that are important to their lives as they see it rather than forcing themselves to figure it out when they are twenty. If you decide you need to take the time out to figure out whether you want to go to medical school or not, then that's a very sincere thing to do. It's still very honest, and I think it will help more than it hinders."

What Amy learned from having that time off affected her views about the medical profession and her views of medicine as a job and a commitment, both of which made an impact on her perspective as a mature, experienced adult. Medicine became an occupational as well as an academic field. In this way, her "diversions" most affected her as an applicant. It's not a question of recommending this course of action. The message from medical schools in terms of admissions is that people shouldn't be afraid to do whatever they feel they need to do."

Once a student gets accepted to medical school, he/she will be in a class with perhaps a couple of nineteen year olds and several students over thirty, with most students between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-four. How does a "nontraditional" student fit in? Surprisingly well. Amy says that at Stanford, and probably at many other medical schools, most students actually have taken two years off away from academics to search out and develop a particular interest that they have.

Performance-wise, there are definite differences. "Traditional" students who may not have experienced much else outside the classroom tend to get more stressed. They are more critical of themselves in terms of how well they do. The older students may be a little anxious and unsure because they haven"t done this much studying for a while. But for them to consider beginning medical school at their age, they must be committed and could possibly contribute some experiences and talents that younger students cannot. Those who have taken perhaps a couple years off, such as Amy, realize that they can still turn to other professions if they need to. This helps them get through medical school without feeling overwhelmed.
Older Applicants

The childhood longing to become a doctor has resurfaced, but this time it is here to stay. Now that the decision is final, there is one stop left, apply! The older student may experience more difficulties and criticism than traditional younger students. This is because they may have responsibilities to a family or a previous occupation. The admissions officials may question the late decision to enter medical school and the ability of older students to compete with intense, fresh students. On the other hand, older applicants have an edge over the naive traditional students. With the experience of life or another profession, many older applicants have unique talents to offer medical schools. Qualities and skills learned from other interests during the past years may be decisive assets to entrance into medical school. For example, Dr. Melvin Konner entered medical school at the age of 33. He had always wanted to be a physician, but early in his life decided to study human behavior by becoming an anthropologist and then a Harvard professor. He is a well-known scholar, tenured professor, respected writer (cf. The Tangled Wing and Becoming a Doctor), husband, and father. Using his life experiences and his versatility, Dr. Konner easily impressed all the admissions officers and accomplished his life goal of becoming a physician. His book, Becoming a Doctor, is inspiring and may be useful to those leaning towards a medical profession.

Minority Applicants

Applying to medical school can be a difficult and anxiety-producing process. For minority pre-medical students, there are often additional issues to be considered in the application process. Although factors such as location, curriculum and cost are of key importance to any student selecting a medical school, it is also important to investigate such issues as recruitment and retention of minority students at a particular school under investigation.

It is often extremely important for a minority medical student to have the support of a strong minority affairs office and other minority students at your medical school. Often the number of minority faculty and housestaff at most institutions are scarce, if not non-existent, increasing the importance of these support bases.

It is important to get a feel for these factors in your interview as well as during visits to schools to which you are applying. Many schools sponsor special weekends for accepted minority students which gives you an additional opportunity to address these issues, as well as to interact with minority students already enrolled at the schools. Remember, you are choosing the school, just as it is choosing you.

It is recommended that you seek as many sources as possible to get differing viewpoints and further advice.

For additional information, you may want to contact the American Association of Medical Colleges (AAMC). AAMC publishes a yearly guide entitled "Minority Student Opportunities in the United States." This is an excellent book which lists, by school, numbers of minority students enrolled, minority affairs office contact persons, and summer programs designed for minority pre-medical students.

Interviewing Tips
The interview trip can be a truly informative experience and it is important to approach it with well-defined goals so that you can get the most out of it. When interviewing at a school, try to arrange to stay with a minority medical student. Many schools have systems set up to arrange such a match and allow you to meet with other minority students at the school on the interview day. Also try to set up a meeting with the minority affairs office director/dean and financial aid office.

Financial Aid

Minority students graduate with higher than average debt when compared to the general medical student population. It is important to seek out sources of financial aid to help tackle this problem.

TIPS FOR APPLYING

- Contact minority medical students to solicit advice on the selection and application process.
- Seek out minority physicians in your area through local professional organizations (e.g., National Medical Assoc.). Many will allow you to shadow them to get an early taste of life as a physician.
- Attend medical school information sessions. Medical school minority affairs offices often send recruiters to campuses.
- Become linked with national medical student organizations such as AMSA and SNMA (an organization of minority medical students).
- Look for financial resources early. Medical school can be very expensive. Don't forget there is an AMCAS or AACOMAS fee-waiver available for those needing financial assistance.
- Take advantage of your interviews to obtain vital information.

Applicants with Disabilities

Tips for Premedical Students with Chronic Illnesses and Disabilities

by Phyllis A. Nsia-Kumi

Medical education can be a daunting task, and living with a chronic illness, mental illness, learning disability, or any other type of disability certainly makes that task more challenging. However, it need not be an insurmountable challenge. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss possible challenges that you as a student with a chronic illness or disability may face in medical school and how to overcome them, specifically focusing on what you can do during the application process to ensure your success.

Individuals in medicine who have chronic illness or disabilities face a number of challenges. Among them are the frequent inflexibility of the system; inaccessibility/inavailability of necessary resources, support services and personnel; ignorance on the part of peers, faculty and administrators; confidentiality issues; a lack of role models/mentors; and prejudice and discrimination. All of these are in addition to the actual challenges posed by your condition itself and the challenges posed by medical school. These
challenges are not listed to discourage you, but to give you some hints as to what to expect. If you are prepared for what lies ahead, then you can more capably handle it and get on with the business of becoming a physician.

**DISCLOSURE**

One of the challenges you will face surrounds the issue of disclosure. The fact that you have a chronic illness or disability is a very confidential matter. When should you disclose your chronic illness or disability, if at all? Should you discuss it in your personal statement? Should you mention it only after you have decided to attend a particular institution? Who do you tell? What policies exist relating to confidentiality? What rights do you have based on current legislation? What questions can you be asked in an interview? How do you respond if these illegal questions are asked? If you were to disclose your disability to a particular individual or office, who else is permitted to know about it without your notification? These are important questions which require careful consideration. This is certainly beyond the scope of this brief chapter. Suffice it to say that this is a decision that only you can make.

Before you can make a decision, you need to be educated on the issues. For more information, contact organizations such as Association for Higher Education and Disability, the HEATH Resource Center, and the Association for People with Disabilities as well as the disabilities services and/or affirmative action offices at the institutions you are considering. (The contact information for the first three organizations is given at the end of this chapter.) Last, but certainly not least, earn about the Americans with Disabilities Act.

When contacting any one of the institutions you are considering, you do not have to identify yourself by name or give all the details right away. Have everyone on a need to know basis. You need to say enough to get you to the right person, and then you should be able to explain things to that one person. At that point, you still do not have to give your name.

There are instances in which non-disclosure is to your advantage. However, if you anticipate needing special services, or accommodations, you may have no choice but to disclose your condition. Even then, it is not necessary to disclose this information during the application process. It becomes most relevant after you are accepted to a particular school. Whatever you decide, know your rights and what recourse you have available to you, should those rights be violated.

**ACCOMMODATIONS FOR THE MCAT**

Your chronic illness or disability may make you eligible for special testing accommodations for the MCAT, especially if you are currently receiving them or previously received them as an undergraduate. For more information on the procedure, refer to the registration booklet and contact the office of disabilities services at your current academic institution.

**SELECTING ON AN INSTITUTION**

As you consider various institutions, you must first determine what you need to succeed and then determine if the institution in question is able to provide it. You need to pick the best school for you. You need an environment that will give you everything you need to succeed and will help you grow as a person.
Contact the student support services office at the school. If they don't have one, check with the affirmative action office; they will be able to point you in the right direction. Again, you do not have to identify yourself by name; you can tell them you are a prospective student. Tell them that you have a chronic illness/disability and may at some point be in need of accommodations. You want to ask about confidentiality, testing, flexibility of courses and curriculum, etc. They will tell you what is available and what sort of certification, documentation, etc. you need. If you need testing accommodations, don't forget that you will need to go through extra paperwork to get them for boards after years 2 and 3. Be sure to ask about this early.

Find out as much as you can about the schools you are considering. Read their promotional literature, go to informational sessions, and talk to students. Your interview is another invaluable opportunity to gain first-hand information.

Find out ahead of time how flexible the curriculum is. Does this school have a five year program? Are there courses you could take in the summer if you had to? Can you go part-time if it becomes necessary? What types of student support services are available? Does the school offer tutoring or study groups? Are there faculty and/or peer mentoring programs? Who would you go to in the event that you had difficulties? These are all important questions to consider.

Be sure to consider other factors as well. Are buildings on the campus accessible? Can the school supply you with any accommodations you may need such as a note-taker, extra exam time, separate testing conditions and breaks during exams? If the weather affects your condition significantly, then you need to consider climate as well. Consider the distance between the school and your interpersonal support system as well. How far will you be from friends, family and mentors? If an institution offers a great curriculum but does not appear to have a good support system, is it really a wise choice?

**ONCE YOU HAVE DECIDED**

Take OWNERSHIP of your education. These tips are good to start using now in your premedical years, but they are especially important to remember as you continue your journey to becoming a physician.

- **O** - Overcome Obstacles- determine what they are, and get to work on overcoming them.
- **W** - Work Hard.
- **N** - Never Give Up; Never Be Ashamed of Who You Are.
- **E** - Expect Great Things; Evaluate- from time to time, check up on your progress.
- **R** - Responsibility - be responsible for yourself. No one can do this for you. Resources- know who and what is available and take advantage of it. Find people who are where you want to be and talk to them.
- **S** - Support System; Socialize.
H - Honesty - Never lie. At the same time, you do not have to share everything with everyone, even when asked. Decline to answer some questions, and learn to dodge others and change the subject when necessary.

I - Independence; Information - know what you are entitled to; know what resources are available. Understand that most people are probably ignorant of your specific condition, unique situation and needs. Be prepared to educate them honestly and connect them with resources when appropriate.

P - Proactive - Do not wait for things to happen; this is being reactive. Plan ahead and make things happen; this is being proactive. Have short and long term goals-academically and personally.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Do not deny that your condition or its impact on your activities of daily living. Figure out what YOU need to succeed and do everything in your power to get it, in advance, even if you may not need it right away. A lot of the process is lengthy and requires lots of paperwork. START AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. Always plan ahead. Try to keep as far ahead as possible, since you never know when a down time will strike. Have a safety net. Do not give in to inferiority complexes or discouragement. Be confident. You know yourself better than anyone at the school does. It will be apparent that you are being responsible and proactive. Tell them what you feel that you need and find out what they have available. Be assertive. Do not relinquish your rights by being passive. Decide what is acceptable to you. Do not let someone else decide for you. You have to live with this decision. Do not be afraid to be creative. There is not only one way to do things. Be knowledgeable about available resources.

Early on, get a copy of the disabilities, accommodations information in the school handbook. It is important to know about official policies relating to these issues.

Don't expect breaks because of your illness or disability. Not everyone understands, or even tries. You should expect reasonable accommodations, but not extra breaks. You need to be just as qualified as everyone else in whatever you do, if not more so. Study hard; work hard. Whatever you do, do it with all you've got. Always do your best.

Finally, good luck to you. Refer to the resources below for more information, and do not hesitate to contact AMSA’s Committee on Disabilities if we can be of any assistance to you, both now and during your medical school experience.

"...if you can learn to think big, nothing in the world can keep you from being successful in whatever you choose to do"; "Don't go around with a long face, expecting something bad to happen; anticipate good things; watch for them... " Benjamin S. Carson, MD

Lesbian, Gay, & Bisexual Applicants

Out. The word doesn't mean much to a heterosexual pre-medical student, but to an other-than-heterosexual pre-medical student the word can be anxiety-provoking. Being "out" may mean many
different things to a gay, lesbian or bisexual individual. When the gay, lesbian, or bisexual pre-medical student is applying to medical schools across the country, he or she may wonder, "Should I reveal my sexual orientation during the application process?" When considering this, he or she should ask the following questions:

**Do I need to be in a gay- or lesbian-supportive environment?**

The field of medicine is often homophobic, as are many other business and professional careers. Indeed, there are also areas within medicine which are very "homophilic" or accepting and supportive of gay men and lesbians. As a pre-med you may feel that this doesn't matter. But if you feel the need to be in a gay- or lesbian-supportive environment, then you need to find out which schools are the most supportive of gays or lesbians. You can do this in a variety of ways, including contacting other gay and lesbian medical students through AMSA's Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual People in Medicine, a committee in the Standing Committee on Advocacy, or simply investigating the curricula of schools to see if they address gay and lesbian issues. Bear in mind that even in programs that are not gay or lesbian supportive there are "pockets" of support. If you end up in a very non-supportive school, you may find yourself frustrated and alone. This can be especially true at smaller schools.

**How out am I to myself?**

Before a person can be open with others, he or she needs to find within him/herself the extent to which a gay, lesbian or bisexual orientation exists. If a person is very open to everyone in his/her world, he or she could still not be ready to feel comfortable disclosing this in medical school. Moreover, even if you are very comfortable with yourself, if you are in a non-supportive environment you may not feel comfortable being open. Therefore, you must evaluate, by whatever method you find helpful, how comfortable you are with your own sexual orientation. To this extent, you may also ask yourself several other related questions such as, "How much do I worry about what people think?" "What do I do when I am faced with difficult situations regarding my sexual orientation?" "Do I give or receive support from my gay or lesbian friends?" "Am I uncomfortable with the topic of sexual orientation?" "Do I deny the knowledge of my true sexual orientation to others?" "When do I reveal my sexual orientation?" "Why do I reveal my sexual orientation?"

**How important is it for me to be open with others?**

Many gay or lesbian individuals find it unnecessary to reveal their sexual orientation to others, while others feel the need to be open. You can only answer this after you evaluate how "out" you are to yourself. If you are an individual who feels very strongly about being open with others, then you may need to be perfectly honest in the application process, regardless of how open you are with yourself or to others. On the other hand, you may feel that being open is unrelated to your medical career and interaction with other health care professionals. If this is so, it would not be appropriate to reveal your sexual orientation. Each individual will find him/herself in a different position based on their life experiences and world view.

**What do medical schools think of gay or lesbian applicants?**

Rather the question should be, "Will being gay or lesbian affect my chances of getting in to medical school?" Generally, the answer is no since most medical schools have several or many gay or lesbian
medical students who are well-integrated into the medical school curriculum. Unfortunately, this is not true of all schools and, as stated before, homophobia exists everywhere, so be warned that if members of the selection committee happen to be especially homophobic, you may not be accepted. While people may deny their homophobia, in reality they often do not even realize how and in what subtle ways they discriminate. However, this should not discourage the pre-med who wants to be open about his/her sexual orientation. Remember, that if you do not get into a school that rejects you based on your sexual orientation, it is probably good that you did not end up there because the atmosphere of the school in all probability is not supportive of gay and lesbian issues or individuals. So, this can be an advantage, since essentially, schools will weed themselves out of your prospective list.

How many gay, lesbian or bisexual pre-meds choose to be open?

You will find that although many gay or lesbian pre-meds are open, they choose not to reveal their sexual orientation during the application process. Many students wait until they have been accepted to medical school to make others aware of their identity. With the constant reality of homophobia in our society, this is probably the most common approach.

Just how open to be during interviewing is an individual decision. But remember to anticipate negative responses, and then decide what is really the negative part -- having the interview go sour and not be accepted or being in a homophobic program which may not have taken you if they knew?

How can I be open in the application process?

If you find that you would like to be open in the application process, you could do so in a variety of ways, depending on how much emphasis you want to give that part of your life. In your personal statement, you could discuss briefly your interest in lesbian and gay issues or you could list your gay and lesbian affiliations in the application itself. There are many other ways as well. However, these are the two most obvious and direct, and both will tend to mark you as a gay or lesbian applicant. You also may choose not to include such information in your application but instead refer to your interest in gay and lesbian issues during your interviews. This will also allow you to evaluate the homophobic or homophilic aspects of the school at which you are looking. You may even ask the admission office to put you in contact with some gay or lesbian medical students at that school.

What can I do if I decide not to reveal my sexual orientation?

If you feel that you do not want or need to reveal your sexual orientation, you need not feel alone. You can still find and access other gay and lesbian support groups within your community and across the nation.

You can feel comfortable that these groups are confidential and that your privacy will be strictly respected. These groups provide support and education to lesbian, gay and bisexual students, physicians, and patients and should be your resource to gay and lesbian issues that come up during medical school. Use them, you will find them rewarding and helpful!

Where do I find gay- or lesbian-supportive health care groups?

In the past, the health care system has neglected homosexual individuals as well as other minority groups within its ranks. One of the first gay and lesbian health care support groups was formed in 1976
by members of the American Medical Student Association (AMSA). This group is now known as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People in Medicine (LGBTPM), a committee in the Standing Committee on Advocacy and has grown immensely since its inception. LGBTPM is a diverse and eclectic group of several hundred members, of all sexual orientations, who have a variety of interests in lesbian, gay and bisexual issues. LGBTPM is dedicated to promoting quality health care for lesbians, gay men and bisexual individuals, as well as providing networking opportunities and support for lesbian, gay and bisexual medical students. LGBTPM has a large network of medical school chapters around the country which hold meetings and events. Also, LGBTPM publishes individual newsletters for its members. Newsletters contain information about activities at local chapters, news from around the country, conference listings and a directory of contact students at various medical schools. LGBTPM also has workshops and speakers at the annual AMSA National Convention.

Other gay and lesbian health care support groups exist, including the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association (GLMA, a gay and lesbian physicians group, the Association of Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists (AGLP), as well as many local gay and lesbian people in health care groups. These groups can all be easily accessed by contacting the executive director or coordinators of these groups who will be glad to give you feedback or any assistance with your application or any other questions you might have. As a student you are welcome to join any or all of these organizations.

So...should I be open?

Only you can answer this question, and although it is a tough decision, it can be important because it can affect where you end up in medical school and how you go through medical school. Remember to find out how you feel about yourself and how comfortable you feel being open with others. These are the important aspects to consider. Additionally, find out about the gay and lesbian atmosphere of the schools to which you are applying. Try to contact gay or lesbian students at the schools in which you are interested, and if that is not possible contact an LGBTPM Coordinator for more information. Do not let anybody tell you what you should do or how you should do it. Be informed, ask yourself the above questions and then make your decision. Most importantly, trust your feelings about your comfort zone and what you think is best for you.

Resources

Below are some additional resources to help you in your journey to medical school:

- General Applicants
- Minority Applicants
- Applicants with Disabilities
- Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Applicants

RESOURCES FOR GENERAL APPLICANTS

MCAT Program Office
http://www.aamc.org/students/mcat/start.htm
2255 North Dubuque Road
RESOURCES FOR MINORITY APPLICANTS

AMSA Race, Ethnicity and Culture in Health Action Committee
http://www.amsa.org/AMSA/Homepage/About/Committees/REACH.aspx

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One Sansome Street, Suite 1000, San Francisco, CA 94101
(877) HSF-INFO (473-4636)
e-mail: info@hsf.net

National Association for Hispanic Elderly
Asociacion Nacional Por Personas Mayores
1452 West Temple St, Suite 100, Los Angeles, CA 90026-1724
Ph: (213) 487-1922 | Fax: (213) 208-5905

Youth Opportunities Foundation
PO Box 45762
8820 South Sepulveda Blvd, Suite 208, Los Angeles, CA 90045
(213) 670-7664

League of United Latin American Citizens
http://www.lulac.org
(202) 408-0060
AAUW Educational Foundation  
2401 Virginia Ave NW, Washington, DC 20037  
(for women in final year of medical school)

Mexican American Women's National Association Raquel Marquez Frankel Scholarship Fund  
1201 16th Street Northwest, Suite 203, Washington, DC 20037

Comison Fememil de Los Angeles  
379 South Loma Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90017  
(213) 484-1515

Alpha Epsilon Iota Scholarship Fund  
Ann Arbor Trust Company  
PO Box 12, Ann Arbor, MI 48107

American Indian Scholarships, Inc.  
Box 1106, Taos, NM 87571

Association of American Indian Affairs  
Emergency Aid Scholarship Fund  
432 Park Ave South, New York, NY 10016

Navaho National Scholarship Assistance Program  
Department of Higher Education  
PO Drawer S., Window Rock, AZ 86515

Insurance Medical Scientists Scholarship Fund  
1295 State St, Springfield, MA 01111

Minority Scholarship for Texas Medical School Scholarship Listing  
http://www.texmed.org/education_cme_index/student_area/minority_scholarship.htm

California Chicano/Latino Medical Student Association Minority Medical Students  
http://www.lmsa.net/

RESOURCES FOR APPLICANTS WITH DISABILITIES

AMSA Community & Environmental Health Action Committee  
http://www.amsa.org/AMSA/Homepage/About/Committees/CEH.aspx

American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD)  
1819 H Street NW, Suite 330  
Washington, D.C. 20006

Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD)
RESOURCES FOR LESBIAN, GAY AND BISEXUAL APPLICANTS

AMSA Gender & Sexuality Action Committee
http://www.amsa.org/gender/

Association of Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists
http://www.aglp.org/
AGLP National Office
4514 Chester Ave, Philadelphia, PA 19143-3707
(215) 222-2800
aglp@aglp.org

Gay and Lesbian Medical Association
http://www.glma.org
459 Fulton St, Suite 107, San Francisco, CA 94102
(415) 255-4547
info@glma.org