

## Chapter 1

# Turning Your Dream of Going to Medical School into a Reality

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Considering a career as a physician
  - ▶ Getting an overview of the premedical years and the medical school application process
  - ▶ Investigating osteopathic medical schools and other programs
  - ▶ Looking at issues affecting nontraditional and other applicants with special situations
  - ▶ Gearing up to start medical school
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**M**edicine is one of the most attractive and competitive professions to enter. However, with perseverance and a strong commitment, you can achieve your goal of becoming a physician as long as you're willing to work hard. To get you started, this chapter gives you the big picture about what becoming a physician entails, surveys the medical school application process, and provides you with tips for getting ready for medical school. The later chapters of this book delve deeper into these topics to help you as you undertake your quest to get into medical school.

## *So You Want to Be a Doctor: Thinking about Medicine as a Career*

Among the many benefits of a career in medicine is the opportunity to be part of a profession that is intellectually satisfying, personally rewarding, and constantly changing. Physicians have a unique opportunity to impact people's lives in a positive way on a daily basis in the context of a job with a high level of responsibility and autonomy. But these advantages come at a price. One of the major drawbacks to a medical career is that it takes at least

11 years of post-secondary education and training to become a full-fledged, practicing physician. The three phases you undergo are

- ✓ College (4 years)
- ✓ Medical school (4 years)
- ✓ Residency (3 years or more depending on specialty)

Some highly specialized fields require an additional year or more of training through a fellowship.

Premedical students traditionally take the courses required for entry into medical school during their undergraduate studies. However, for those who develop an interest in medicine after receiving a bachelor's degree, a post-baccalaureate premedical program offers a route to completing the basic science classes needed to be admitted into medical school.

Admission to medical school is highly competitive. Your academic record and scores on the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) are typically the most important factors in the admissions process; however, schools also consider many other factors such as your extracurricular experiences, letters of recommendation, personal statement, and interpersonal skills.



Explore the medical profession carefully before you make your decision about whether to pursue a career as a physician. The self-assessment tool in Chapter 2 helps get you thinking about whether the medical profession is a good fit for you.

## *Mapping Out College and Participating in Extracurricular Activities*

During college, you complete your prerequisite coursework for medical school and obtain your bachelor's degree (only in rare cases do students enter medical school without a bachelor's degree). When choosing a college, focus on finding one that's the right fit for you and that offers an academic program you're interested in and opportunities for involvement in activities outside the classroom.

You also need to determine which major to pursue as a premedical student. Medical schools don't require a particular major; as long as you complete the prerequisite coursework, you can choose any major, including one in a discipline outside the sciences. However, even if you major in a nonscience field, taking some upper level science classes is a good idea; doing so enhances your application and helps prepare you for med school.

If you discover your interest in medicine after you've already obtained your bachelor's degree, you can take the coursework needed to enter medical school as a post-baccalaureate student. Post-bac options range from highly structured career-changer programs to taking courses independently through a local college or university. (For a list of required and recommended premedical coursework for both traditional and post-bac applicants, flip to Chapter 3.)



Taking your prerequisites at a four-year institution rather than a community college is strongly recommended. Med schools generally prefer that prereqs be completed at a four-year school, and some programs won't accept ones completed at a community college.

Schools seek students who are not only academically qualified but also well rounded. Demonstrating that you've explored medicine is especially important, so gaining experience in the field of medicine before applying to medical school is essential. Volunteering at a hospital or in an outpatient setting, doing physician shadowing, and participating in research are ways to gain exposure to the medical profession so that the schools (and you) know that you're confident about your career choice. Admissions committees also take into account employment, community service, leadership, and other non-medical experiences when assessing an applicant. Check out Chapter 4 for details on making the most of extracurricular activities.

## *Assessing the Medical School Application Process*

Securing a seat in medical school requires aspiring physicians to go through a very comprehensive admissions process. By completing each aspect of the application early and well, you maximize your chance of ending the cycle with an acceptance in hand.

### *Looking at the timeline*



If you plan to go directly from college to medical school, you apply to medical school at the end of your junior year of college. The three major steps of the application process are

- ✓ Submitting your primary application
- ✓ Completing secondary applications
- ✓ Going to interviews

The American Medical College Application Service (AMCAS) application is the application service used by most allopathic (MD) schools in the United States. Most osteopathic (DO) medical schools use the American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine Application Service (AACOMAS). Public medical schools in Texas (MD and DO) use the Texas Medical and Dental Schools Application Service (TMDSAS). The AMCAS, AACOMAS, and TMDSAS applications are known as *primary applications*.

AMCAS and AACOMAS applications become available online in May and may be submitted beginning in early June; TMDSAS opens in early May, and applications may be submitted starting then. Admissions to most medical schools are *rolling*, which means that schools evaluate applications as they receive them. That's why submitting your application early in the cycle is extremely important.

In addition to a primary application, most medical schools also require a school-specific *secondary* (supplemental) application. If you submit your primary application in June, most of your secondaries will arrive during the summer. Fill them out and return them to the schools as soon as possible.

Interviews start in August at some schools and are in full force by early fall at most schools. They typically continue through January or early February, although at some programs they run as late as April. Allopathic medical schools begin offering acceptances as early as mid-October for regular applicants. Early decision applicants to AMCAS schools are notified by October 1.

See Chapter 5 for more details about the med school application timeline.

## *Taking the MCAT*

Taking the MCAT is one of the most important and most dreaded parts of applying to medical school. The MCAT consists of three sections: physical sciences, verbal reasoning, and biological sciences. Each section is scored on a scale from 1 to 15 (1 is the lowest), for a total score of 3 to 45. A 31 is typically competitive for allopathic medical schools. (Prior to 2013, the test also included a writing sample, but that has been phased out in the lead-up to the full test revision in 2015.)



The revised MCAT is scheduled to be released in the spring of 2015. As part of the changes to the MCAT, the test is revamping the science and verbal reasoning sections, adding a section testing behavioral science topics, and becoming longer.

The MCAT is a difficult test and requires extensive preparation. Some students find taking a test preparation course to be the most effective way to prepare; others prefer self-study. Either way, you need to set up a study schedule and allow at least three months of time to get ready for the exam — longer if you're splitting your time between studying for your classes and preparing for the MCAT. Chapter 6 has details on test-prep strategies and the current and revised MCAT.

## *Selecting schools*

Compiling a strategic list of medical schools is an essential part of success in the application process. If you overreach, you may find yourself finishing the cycle without a single acceptance. Underestimating yourself may lead to regrets as you wonder “What if?” you had tried for your dream schools.

Aim to compile a targeted list of schools that takes into account school type (public or private), rank, cost, curriculum, size, location, and how likely you are to be admitted. The goal is to put together a list that is a manageable length and gives you a good chance of being admitted *somewhere* but that won't risk selling you short.

## *Submitting primary applications*

Although the three types of primary applications (AMCAS, AACOMAS, TMDSAS) each have a different format and specific requirements, they ask for the much of the same basic information. This includes biographical/background information, colleges attended, coursework, grades, MCAT scores, work experiences, extracurricular activities, honors/awards, and a personal statement. (TMDSAS also has two optional essays.) You only have to fill out a particular primary application once. After your primary is submitted to the application service and has been verified, the information on it will be transmitted to each of the schools that you have designated. Primary applications require a fee that depends on the number of schools to which you're applying.



Writing the personal statement is the most difficult part of completing the primary application for most applicants. Start brainstorming at least two months before you plan to submit your application, and anticipate going through many drafts to perfect it. Chapter 8 provides guidance about writing the personal statement and completing other areas of the primary application.

## *Obtaining letters of recommendation*

Some undergraduate institutions and post-baccalaureate programs have pre-medical committees that write a letter endorsing or evaluating students or alumni who are applying to medical school. The committee usually includes the premedical advisor as well as one or more faculty members. The committee compiles a letter discussing the applicant's candidacy for medical school. The committee letter may include quotations from individual letters of recommendation and/or may have individual letters attached to it.

If your institution doesn't offer a committee letter, don't worry; you simply obtain individual letters from faculty and others to submit as part of your application. Each medical school has its own requirements for individual letters, so check with the schools to make sure you obtain the correct type and number of letters. (See Chapter 9 for more information).

## *Completing secondary applications*

After submitting your primary application, you get a brief break before you move on to the next stage of the admissions process: secondary applications. The simplest secondaries require only that you submit a fee and perhaps fill out a short form. Other secondaries include several short-answer or essay questions that ask you to explain why you've chosen to apply to the school or to elaborate on your experiences and background.



Keeping up with secondaries can be difficult, but submit them as quickly as you can without compromising on the quality. After you fill out a few secondaries, you'll likely find that you have a bank of essays to work from that you can modify for other schools; however, make sure you tailor your answer to the school and question being asked. Check out Chapter 9 for more details on completing secondaries.

## *Interviewing with schools*

Landing a medical school interview is a big accomplishment; you're much closer to being admitted to medical school if you've reached this stage.

At most schools, the interview visit includes touring the medical school; meeting medical students; attending talks by the admissions office, faculty, and/or administrators; and undergoing one to three interviews. Interviewers may be basic science faculty, physicians, or medical students. At some schools, interviews are conducted one-on-one; at others, you interview

in front of a panel of two or more interviewers, either by yourself or with another applicant or applicants.

Some schools have switched from traditional interview formats to the *multiple mini-interview* (MMI) format. During an MMI, applicants rotate through a circuit of timed stations. Types of stations include those that require role-playing, teamwork, or analyzing a bioethics case.

Chapter 10 provides tips on getting ready for both traditional and MMI format interviews as well as a list of commonly asked interview questions.

## *Hearing whether you're in, out, or waitlisted*

Months of preparation and waiting culminate with a decision from the admissions committee.

- ✔ If it's a "yes," take care to send in any required forms and/or a deposit to reserve your seat in the class. Students who are in the fortunate position of holding multiple acceptances may decide to go for a *second look* weekend offered by some schools in the spring before making their final decisions.
- ✔ A "no" answer is disappointing, especially if a school is one of your top choices. However, if you receive a negative response, consider contacting the admissions office to see whether you can get feedback about the reason for the rejection. This information may help you during the current cycle or in the next one if you have to reapply.
- ✔ If you're put on the waitlist, don't give up; you still have a chance of being admitted. Keep in touch with the school (unless it discourages that) by sending a letter of update, letter of interest, and/or additional letter of recommendation. This extra information keeps the school apprised of your ongoing activities and desire to attend its program.

Chapter 11 has full details on what to do when you hear back from medical schools.

## *Considering All Your Options*

Attending an osteopathic medical school is another route to becoming a physician. DO schools are similar in many ways to their MD counterparts but

have some distinctive attributes as well. International schools also offer an alternative for students seeking to obtain a medical degree.

Some medical schools team up with undergraduate or graduate institutions to offer joint degree programs. By participating in one of these setups, you can receive your bachelor's and medical degree or both a medical and graduate (master's or doctorate) degree as part of an integrated program.

## *Osteopathic medical schools*

You can achieve your goal of practicing medicine by obtaining an allopathic or osteopathic medical degree. Both allopathic and osteopathic medical programs are four years long and include courses in basic science subjects as well as clinical rotations in hospitals and outpatient settings. Graduates of DO schools are eligible for medical licensure throughout the United States after completing medical school and one or more years of residency training as well as passing a series of licensure examinations.

The *osteopathic* philosophy emphasizes a holistic approach to patient care as well as disease prevention and wellness. Osteopathic medical schools traditionally have focused more on primary care than allopathic schools; however, many DOs are found in specialties as well. The major difference between allopathic and osteopathic medical education is that only DO schools include training in osteopathic manipulative medicine (OMM) as part of their curriculum.

The structure of the application process for allopathic and osteopathic medical schools is similar, although they use different primary applications. Many osteopathic medical school applicants apply to MD schools as well. Head to Chapter 12 for more information about osteopathic medical schools.

## *Dual-degree programs*

Dual-degree programs, which I discuss in Chapter 13, combine an MD or DO with another degree. High-school students interested in medicine may apply to joint baccalaureate-MD/DO programs. These programs last six to eight years and lead to both a BA or BS degree and a medical degree. Admission into the medical school affiliated with the program is often provisional, and matriculation into the program's medical school component may require maintaining a minimum grade-point average (GPA) during the undergraduate component and/or taking the MCAT and achieving a certain score.



Students interested in pursuing a career that combines both clinical medicine and research may opt to enter a joint MD-PhD program. These programs usually last seven to eight years and often provide participants with full tuition for medical school as well as a stipend for living expenses. Admission into these programs is very competitive and requires a strong background in research.

## *International medical schools*

Some students choose to obtain their medical degrees outside the United States either because they're unable to gain acceptance to a U.S. medical school or for other reasons, such as ties to a particular country.



Careful research prior to attending an international school is essential, because the quality of education at international institutions varies significantly. International medical graduates (IMGs) must undergo certification by the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG) in order to apply for residency training programs and to become licensed in the United States. Obtaining a residency position is generally more difficult for IMGs than for graduates of U.S. medical schools. Also note that although some international medical schools are eligible to participate in U.S. federal loan programs, others aren't.

**Note:** Canadian medical schools are accredited by the same agency as U.S. schools, so graduates of these schools aren't considered IMGs. Canadian medical schools offer medical educations that meets the same standards as those offered by U.S. schools, and, like U.S. schools, they're highly competitive in terms of admission.

I cover international medical schools in detail in Chapter 14.

## *Taking Care of Special Situations*

Med school applicants come from all backgrounds and demographics. Nontraditional applicants, reapplicants, minority and socioeconomically disadvantaged applicants, and applicants with disabilities are among those who may face particular challenges as they work toward achieving their dream of practicing medicine.

## *Nontraditional applicants*

Some future doctors come to the conclusion that they want to pursue a medical career only after they've graduated from college or have pursued another profession. These nontraditional applicants have the typical concerns about getting into medical school, such as whether their grades are high enough or whether they have sufficient clinical experience. However, they also may have additional issues to address: returning to school after years out of the classroom, juggling family and financial responsibilities along with their studies, and fitting in among their mostly younger classmates.

Although nontraditional applicants may have some extra challenges, they also have the advantage of professional and other experiences that may help them stand out to admissions committees because they offer something different. (Flip to Chapter 15 for more about nontraditional applicants.)

## *Reapplicants*

If you're planning to apply to medical school for a second or subsequent time, reevaluate every element of your application to identify and address weaknesses before you forge ahead. Some steps that you may need to take to improve your odds of admission include the following (see Chapter 16 for details):

- ✓ **Strengthening your academic record.** You can accomplish this task through a formal academic record enhancer post-baccalaureate program or by taking courses at a college or university outside of a structured program.
- ✓ **Retaking the MCAT.**
- ✓ **Adding new clinical, research, and community service experiences.**
- ✓ **Applying to a broader range of schools.**

Before you reapply, you should also update your personal statement and secure at least one new letter of recommendation.



If reapplying immediately won't leave you with sufficient time to strengthen your application portfolio, consider waiting a year so that you can ensure that you've got everything in order before trying for admission again.

## ***Minority and disadvantaged applicants and applicants with disabilities***

To further diversify the physician workforce, many medical schools and other organizations offer outreach programs, enrichment opportunities, and scholarships for students who are members of groups underrepresented in the medical profession. Minority and socioeconomically disadvantaged students interested in medicine can also find information about resources available to them from premedical advisors, medical school diversity offices, and premedical and medical student organizations.

Advances in technology have opened the doors to medical school wider than ever for individuals with disabilities. However, these applicants often have extra tasks to tend to as they apply to medical school, such as arranging for accommodations on the MCAT, determining whether and when to disclose a disability to programs, and working with schools to address accommodations during their medical education. Chapter 17 addresses these areas as well as topics relevant to minority and disadvantaged applicants.

## ***Heading to Medical School***

With the application process behind you, you can get ready to start medical school. One of the top items on your list of things to do is to figure out how you'll pay for medical school. If you're relocating, you also have to tackle logistics such as finding a place to live and what kind of transportation you need in your new city. After the year gets underway, being organized, building a support system, and effectively managing stress help ensure your success as a medical student.

## ***Confronting the cost***

The *cost of attendance* (COA) of medical school includes not only tuition but also books, equipment, and other educational expenses, as well as living expenses such as rent, transportation, and food. Use the estimated cost of attendance supplied by your medical school's financial aid office as the basis for crafting a budget for the next four years.

Most medical students need some financial aid to pay for medical school. For many medical students, federal loans are the major source of funding for their medical education. Some medical schools award school-based (institutional)

aid to students in the form of grants or scholarships or low-interest loans. Private loans are an option for students who need additional aid.

Some students fund their education through service-based scholarship programs that require a commitment to serve in the armed services or provide care to patients in an underserved area for a certain number of years after the recipient's medical training is complete. Other types of scholarships are awarded based on merit, financial need, or other factors.



Working during the summers before and after your first year of medical school is a means to generate some additional funds, but don't plan to hold a job during the school year. Being a medical student is very much a full-time commitment.

Chapter 18 has the full scoop on paying for medical school.

## *Getting off to a good start*

During the summer just prior to medical school, you may also want to get a head start academically by perusing an anatomy atlas or brushing up on other subjects you study in your first year. However, don't make the summer into a crash course for the first year of medical school. You're about to head into a very demanding academic setting, and going into it refreshed is important as well. You also may be busy over the summer finding a place to live near your med school, packing up, and taking care of all the other details involved with relocating.

Staying organized and formulating a study schedule can help you keep up with the large volume of information you need to master in medical school. Taking breaks to relax, spend time with friends and family, and maintain your physical and emotional health is also important.



Succeeding in medical school is easier with a strong support system in place. Reach out to your classmates to form study groups or organize social events with the people who are going through the experience of being a medical student alongside you. In addition, check with your school's student affairs office to find out what resources your school offers to medical students for academic or other support. Medical school can be stressful, but after you get the hang of it, you may find that the time goes quickly. Before you know it, you'll be a doctor.

Check out Chapter 19 for more tips on starting and succeeding in medical school.