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Starting medical school

Figure 1.1 Becoming a 'good doctor' encompasses many attributes



Figure 1.2 Hippocrates: the father of medicine and author of the Hippocratic Oath



Hints and Tips:

- Ask for **help early**
- Remember that almost everyone is **nervous** on their first day
- Trust your own **capabilities**
- Always **respect basic principles** such as confidentiality
- **Cultivate good habits** from day 1, such as scrupulous hand hygiene

Figure 1.3 1948 World Medical Association modern version of the oath

At the time of being admitted a member of the medical profession:

I solemnly pledge myself to consecrate my life to the service of humanity;

I will give my teachers the respect and gratitude which is their due;

I will practise my profession with conscience and dignity;

The health of my patient will be my first consideration;

I will respect the secrets which are confided in me, even after the patient has died;

I will maintain by all the means in my power, the honour and the noble traditions of the medical profession;

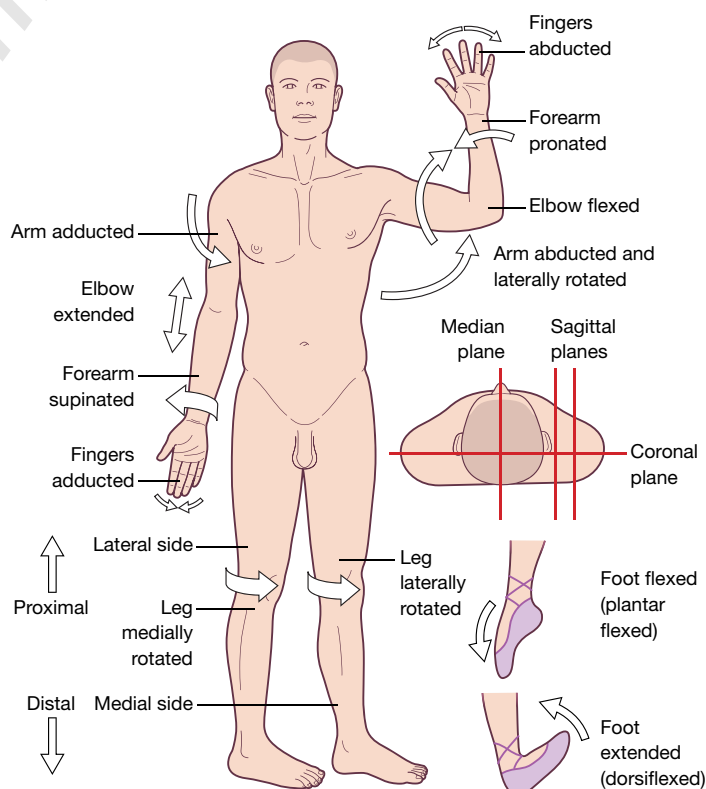
My colleagues will be my brothers;

I will not permit considerations of religion, nationality, race, party politics or social standing to intervene between my duty and my patient;

I will maintain the utmost respect for human life from the time of conception; even under threat I will not use my medical knowledge contrary to the laws of humanity.

I make these promises solemnly, freely and upon my honour.

Figure 1.4 Some anatomical terminology



Source: Figures 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3 Thomas R. *Practical Medical Procedures at a Glance* (2015).
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Source: Faiz O, Blackburn S & Moffat D. *Anatomy at a Glance*, 3rd edn (2011).
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It goes without saying that medical school is an **exciting experience** and a big **commitment**. It will enable you to meet **new friends**, as well as discovering new **social** and **academic opportunities**. As with any big commitment it can be made easier with **adequate preparation**, **well-informed expectations**, **clearly defined goals**, and **well-utilised tools and supports**.

Succeeding at medical school, and then in the various careers that medicine offers, requires more than intellectual rigour. The human body is one of the most amazingly robust, yet phenomenally intricate, systems in existence. So **intellectual rigour** is indeed a requirement.

It is very important to not get bogged down in the **sheer enormity** of what must, at some point, be learned. There is no denying that there is lots of it! Get used to this fact, and then move on, as past this point it is much more interesting. The learning of the facts is just a part of being a 'good doctor' – an important part, but just a part (Figure 1.1).

You may already be familiar with the **Hippocratic Oath**, which is the historical oath relating to the upholding of **ethical standards** by doctors (Figure 1.2). This was updated from the Greek text to a modern version in 1948 (Figure 1.3).

Other parts include a **strong interest** in **humanity** in general, and particularly the sick. This may sound obvious, but it is key! As you will discover, patients **tell you the answers**, if you learn to listen and to **communicate sincerely** and effectively with them. Being able to understand their **social context**, and the impact of a disease on a person's **quality of life**, is important. Being interested in **diseases**, their **diagnosis** and their **treatment** is also crucial. But it is likely that you are already equipped with these skills and interests, or medical school may not have called for you. So instead of being deterred by the sheer volume of facts, take comfort in the skills you already innately have.

At times, being at medical school is like being a detective, gathering all the hints, putting them into the appropriate order, and then piecing the underlying illness together. And there are many other areas – such as **eliciting signs**, learning the **language**, creating possible **differential diagnoses**, **performing diagnostic and therapeutic procedures** – which you will in time master with practice (Figure 1.4).

Different medical schools differ in their approach to learning. Some integrate **clinical care** very **early** on, while others ensure a **theoretical foundation** before you are let loose on the wards. There is no right or wrong way to learn medicine – as long as you end up being a **safe doctor**, then you have learned successfully.

First day nerves

Usually, the first few days of medical school are like any other first few days at university – they are often spent with administration and introductory lectures. Perhaps prepare a **brief statement** about who you are, why you want to study medicine, and any particular interests, as these questions are often used to 'break the ice'.

Starting anything **new** can cause a range of feelings, from **excitement**, to **nervousness** and **stress**. The experiences are deeply **personal** and **unpredictable**. The extent that people feel these emotions, and actually show them, differs greatly.

So, if you feel a bit anxious, take comfort in the fact that you are most likely not alone. It is safe to say that many students on their first day suffer with nerves. This sense of nervousness can continue

for some time. It will pass, as you become more **competent** and **confident** in your skills and knowledge.

Types of stress

Medical school is a **unique experience**. As part of the **healthcare profession**, you will gain access to areas of people's lives that is unparalleled in any other profession – patients, who were strangers to you a moment earlier, will share **deeply personal**, and at times troubling, experiences and information. It goes without saying that this honour can cause a degree of personal stress, particularly when first starting medical school. The stress associated with patient deaths, non-accidental injuries and other aspects of medicine rarely lose their impact, but you will develop **coping strategies** over time. Aside from the stress that can be associated with **patients** and **learning**, there may be the added pressure of **financial stress**. Life does not stop when you start medical school, and in addition you may also have to cope with your own personal stressful **life events** such as bereavements and divorces.

Coping strategies

There are many and varied coping strategies for the stresses of medical school. These will be covered in depth in later chapters – however, for the first few days, meet people, find your bearings and accept that there is a long, interesting, winding path ahead in your career, a career that is simply like no other.

Start to enjoy the **independence**, **choice** and **freedom** that can come with starting a course at university, and become familiar with the various **extracurricular activities** and **societies** that exist. These will help you cope with stresses, and make your time at university more enjoyable in many respects.

General advice

Never be afraid to ask for help. Everyone had to learn once, and your seniors, your colleagues and your peers all know this, and thus will usually be happy to help. It is preferable to **ask for help early** – as often 'a stitch in time, saves nine'.

Trust your own **capabilities**, and never feel pressured into performing a task that you do not feel capable of doing. Even if the task seems basic to someone else, it is important to have enough **confidence** in yourself to know both your capabilities, and your **limitations**. You will always have both, the important skill is recognising where the line lies between the two!

As will be covered in the following chapters, ensure you adhere to important common principles from your first day at medical school – including fully and correctly identify the patient, and respect their confidentiality. You are a doctor in training, and one day soon it will be you on the ward helping these patients. Start cultivating the habits you will require in your career – from adequate hand hygiene to thoroughly documenting actions and interactions – so that these will be second nature once you are actually working as a doctor. Start learning by looking at guidelines and protocols, and embrace **primary literature** and **best current practice** to help your learning.

As with any new skill, there is no substitute for **practice**. The fact that it is referred to as the 'practice' of medicine really gives this one away! While 'practice makes perfect', perfection is, at times, impossible to attain in medicine – what you can achieve, though, is the reliable and consistent delivery of **superior quality care** to your patients.