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Applying to medical school

“Medicine, the only profession that labours incessantly to destroy the reason for its existence.”

Sir James Bryce (1838–1922)

Choosing the right medical schools

Entrance requirements

Most medical schools require students to get A or B grades (mainly As) in at least three full A-level subjects (discounting general studies) or five Scottish Highers. Many schools also require the Scottish Certificate of Sixth Year Studies from applicants educated in Scotland. The entry requirements have gone up, and have remained high despite a downward trend in applicants (which has recently reversed). The average requirement is now AAB (AAABB). Chemistry is usually a compulsory requirement because the principles of chemistry are the key to understanding medical biochemistry, and it would be difficult to teach to the required standard during the course otherwise. Surprisingly, many schools don't insist on biology, although many medics have it as one of their A-levels. In most schools medical teaching covers elementary biology, and there may be supplementary classes for non-biologists during the first year.

Traditionally, the other subjects studied at A-level are sciences or mathematics, but many medical schools now acknowledge that students who pursue other subjects at school are not disadvantaged when they begin studying medicine. Some schools accept applications from students taking chemistry, another science subject and an arts A-level. However it is essential to check with each school before you make your final choices: don't rely upon what others have chosen before if your choices are a non-typical combination. Where possible, the key facts box reflects each medical school's requirements.

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Health status

In addition to academic qualifications, you will also have to fulfil certain health-related entry requirements. Individual schools have different requirements, about which they will inform you if your application is successful, but in general you will need immunity against rubella and tuberculosis if you don't already have it. A majority of schools also require you to prove your hepatitis B status before admission.

Open days and further information

It is very important that you find out as much as possible about the medical schools to which you are considering applying. In Part 2 of this book we give you admission information and views and opinions for you to consider. Only by visiting the school and reading the prospectus and any alternative guides will you be able to assess the atmosphere and whether you will enjoy studying there. Remember, no one knows what life at medical school is like better than those already there. Don't be afraid to approach current medical students: we are generally a friendly bunch and would be more than happy to chat over a coffee about any aspect of medical school life.

Open days will help you decide whether you would prefer a medical school that is part of a larger university, on a campus or spread across a town, in a big city or near the countryside, and where you'd like to live should you accept a place there. It will also allow you to talk to the medics who are already there. Starting university can be a daunting experience, but if you know what to expect then you will be much more at ease. If you can't afford the cost of travelling, get a group together and ask if your school or college will sponsor a minibus or take a coach to an open day. Most open days take place in the summer after students have had their exams and before applications are due. It is better to go early, before students go on vacation, although there are clinical students milling around all year. Well-organised open days have a welcoming team to escort visitors from the station, and organise events, talks, tours, displays, and demonstrations. However, organisation varies greatly from school to school.

Some medical schools run intensive open days during which you may sample lectures. There are courses run commercially, giving application advice as well as an insight into life as a medical student. These can be expensive but may be a good way of helping you decide whether medicine is the right choice for you. Your careers tutor might be able to help you find out about these courses and open days.

If you can't attend an open day, there are a number of people you could write to. The Students Union can deal with enquiries and may have promotional material to send you. The Medical Faculty office should also be able to supply you with the name of the president of the Medical Society, the student group responsible for representing medics and organising sports and social events, so you can contact the students directly. BMA student representatives are always happy to answer questions, and they may be contacted through the medical school or via the BMA Medical Students Committee (see Further Information section).

Applicants with disabilities

As medicine is a vocational course, medical schools do not tend to accept students unless they are confident that the applicant has the potential to meet the requirements of the preregistration house

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officer year. This year is based on a series of learning outcomes, details of which can be obtained from the General Medical Council. Where an applicant has a disability or chronic health problem, which may impact on their study, good admission practice suggests that medical schools should first assess an applicant without reference to their illness or disability. If the school is happy to offer that student a place but feels that clarification of the health challenge is necessary, the applicant should undergo an occupational health assessment to determine whether they would be physically and mentally capable of meeting the learning outcomes of the preregistration year.

Although the attitude of most medical schools is changing, and some have in place very positive practices, it can still be difficult for a student with a significant disability to gain a place at medical school. When considering which medical schools to apply to, you should speak to the medical faculties prior to applying in order to gain an impression of their attitudes. The good medical schools will have past or present students with health problems or disabilities with whom they can put you in touch, and the medical faculty personnel will be encouraging and keen to help. It can also be very helpful to try and arrange a meeting with either the Dean or the Admissions Officer prior to applying.

There are a number of organisations which might also help – in particular, SKILL, the National Bureau for Students with Disabilities. For their address and details of support for people who feel that they are being treated unfairly look in the Further Information appendix of this book.

Mature applicants

Do your research! Much will be gained from making contact with the admissions tutors at those medical schools that you are interested in applying to. The attitude of the admissions staff and the tone of the welcome that you receive can provide clues as to the possible reactions to your application. Do not forget that, as a mature applicant, you are entitled to send “supporting material” to the admissions teams in addition to your UCAS form – do not just limit this to a CV. Discuss with the school the form that this should take. Determine what will make your case most effective. You can use letters of support, details of relevant courses, work experiences, etc. The newer medical schools have been reported to be much more welcoming to those who have had a career elsewhere or who do not fit the typical school-leaver applicant’s profile. Some older establishments, however, are also keen to recruit more mature students. Contact the schools directly. Read the prospectuses carefully.

Above all, be sure that this is what you want to do. At interview, be prepared to be grilled as to the reasons why you want to change your life at this point in time. Remember, nothing sounds as good or as convincing as the truth!

Applicants with dependents

Before selecting where to apply, talk to the universities on your short list. Find out:

- whether it has any medical students with dependents that you can talk to;
- its policy on maternity leave for students;
- whether child care is provided, and whether it is subsidised for students;
- whether there is specific support available for mature students or students with dependents;
- whether there are any special hardship grants for students with dependents.

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Choose universities that are encouraging and positive towards you. The admissions tutor's response to your initial enquiries will speak volumes about that university's potential attitude towards you in the future. Remember, mature women students with young children are more likely than any other group to abandon their course and it doesn't take many brain cells to work out why.

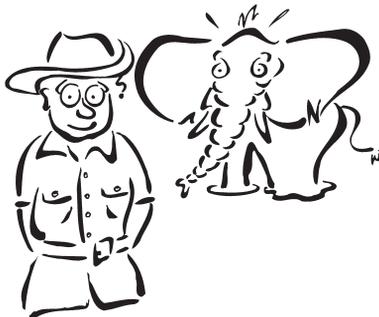
International applicants

The first step for a prospective international student considering studying in Britain is to determine the cost of education in its entirety, (including tuition fees, equipment, books, and living expenses), as this can be very high. The next step is to find out if your country of origin offers any loans, scholarships, or grants to study abroad, as some governments do offer financial relief for their citizens to experience medical training in another country. It is also worth finding out if the university that you are considering offers any scholarships to international students. The best way to find this out is to contact the university directly and ask. British Embassies or High Commissions and your own country's education authorities may also be able to advise you on grants and scholarships.

After reading the university prospectus, you should contact the school and clarify and verify any information, as the situation can change, that may influence your decision to attend a particular school. The British Council will have information about UK universities and medical schools. It will also be able to guide you on whether your qualifications are recognised in the UK. If you are not studying UK-examined A-levels, then contact the admissions office at the medical school to check whether your subject choices and qualifications are acceptable. There are growing links between overseas medical schools and UK schools, and you may be able to do some of your studies in the UK even if you don't get a full-time place on the course. If you are applying to medical schools in other countries you might want to enquire about this.

Applicants from outside the UK must also apply via UCAS and should follow the instructions in the *UCAS Handbook*. You can get copies of the UCAS information from British Council offices or by writing to UCAS. Many schools and colleges will order supplies for you.

Gap years



Many sixth-form students defer entry to university for 12 months. Gap years are looked on favourably by most colleges and universities. The majority, however, expect you to use the time profitably by

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working and/or travelling. It is important that you check the medical school's attitude before you apply if you intend to defer entry. Time out between school and university is not just for those who have the money for a "round-the-world" air ticket: a well-planned gap year will give you time to think about how to get through university and let you assess what you want to get out of the next five or more years. Time spent well will boost your confidence and broaden your experience. This can have a very positive effect on your performance. Student debt is increasing all the time. You could try to save some money and be in better financial shape for your eventual university career. A gap year may also be used to gain some more work experience in health care, although there is no need to overdo it.

Note: A minority of institutions don't approve of gap years. It is best to check the attitude of the individual college(s) to which you are thinking of applying.

The application process

The UCAS form

Medical schools only accept applications made through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). Read through the *UCAS Handbook* and follow the advice closely. Make several drafts of your UCAS form before finalising your application. Your careers tutor at school or college will be able to help you fill in the form. If you do not have a careers tutor try and find someone else to read through a draft version for you before you write it up – perhaps a family friend or your work experience supervisor. When you do write it up, remember to make it accurate and legible.

The most important part of the form is the personal statement. This is your chance to stand out from the crowd and make the admissions tutors want to interview you. What you write will go a long way towards determining how many medical schools offer you an interview or a place. The comments below apply equally to electronic and paper applications.

You can expect – not surprisingly – that the medical school will want to know why you want to study medicine and, as there is so much competition, you must seize this opportunity to demonstrate your commitment to joining the profession. For example, you may want to try to describe what drives you to pursue a career in medicine. Medical schools will want to be sure that you know what you are getting yourself into, and so it is very important to demonstrate how you have gone about trying to understand what a medical career will entail. However, don't take too much space to do this, as it will be at the expense of other important information. The challenge is to do this effectively with supporting evidence of a well-balanced character – for example, a hospital portering job or regular visiting to a local old people's home, along with captaining the school netball team or editing the school magazine. These examples will prove to them that you are a good candidate and that you are well rounded in your interests.

It should be clear from the information supplied by your school or college whether you have the potential to get the grades, so the personal statement must show you as a potential asset to the medical school and, later, the medical profession. They will be looking for:

- signs of good interpersonal skills
- evidence of a social life

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- details of your interests/hobbies
- any notable achievements.

You could mention:

- sports achievements
- academic prizes
- organisational or supervisory positions of responsibility
- voluntary work, part-time work
- musical or travel interests
- projects that you have particularly enjoyed or unusual hobbies.

If you are deferring entry for a year you should explain how you are going to use your time.

There is no need to explain your choice of A-levels/Highers unless you have something interesting to say about them, for example: "I am studying computing as an A-level as I think it may lie at the heart of medicine in the future." Don't be afraid of making bold comments as long as you can justify them. They also offer signposts for interviewers that can be prepared for before an interview (see The Interview section below).

If you are called for an interview, the panel will question you on the contents of this section, so don't lie or exaggerate your interests or achievements. Remember, you may be asked to talk about any of the things you mention, so be truthful – it will probably show very quickly if you have embellished too much!

Admissions staff read hundreds of UCAS forms, and if yours stands out then you will have a better chance of being called for interview. The admissions tutor will want to know that you are prepared for what a career in medicine entails, and that you have realistic expectations, so by the time you post your application form you should have done your research and thinking.

You can use this book to help you decide which schools to apply to, but don't put an overt preference in the application. Another medical school may dismiss your application if they think that you will turn down their offer, and, if you change your mind or your first choice medical school do not offer you a place, you will have limited your options. Also, think carefully about how your statement will appear to an admissions tutor reading it in his or her office. If you express a passionate interest in Premiership football, an admissions tutor at Peninsula might think you would not enjoy being miles from any of the top clubs and not offer you an interview. Equally, an application to a Scottish medical school might appear eminently sensible from a student interested in Ceilidh dancing.

When to apply

Apply as early as possible, but do not rush your application form. Importantly, remember to submit it well before the appropriate deadlines, bearing in mind that applications to certain universities may be earlier than others (such as Cambridge and Oxford). The UCAS guide and website give you all the details. You can submit your application electronically. You may receive replies from medical schools virtually as soon as you apply or you may be kept waiting until the last week that offers can

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be made. Either way do not read too much in to it. Some schools may make a conditional offer on your application alone, whereas others will conduct many rounds of interviews before they make offers or rejections. You may think that you have been forgotten – this is very unlikely, but it does happen. If you are in doubt, and the deadline is approaching, contact the admissions office. You can arrange for UCAS to acknowledge receipt of your form, and you will be given an application number so that you can check its progress if you feel it is taking too long. Admissions offices will be very busy during this time, but a telephone call may put your mind at ease even if they can't give you a decision on your application.

The interview



If you are called to an interview, make sure that you have done your homework thoroughly. The key to a good interview is excellent preparation and lots of practise. Prepare draft answers to the questions that you are likely to be asked. Do not learn these by heart, as you will sound rehearsed, but by thinking ideas through before the interview you will be prepared for possible pitfalls and will have thought about the most important information that you want to include. Practise interviews with anyone who is willing to spare 10 minutes. Ask them to suggest ways of improving your answers or style. This will help you to be more relaxed when it comes to the real thing.

Interviewers will be looking at your UCAS form for inspiration. They will probably be interested in what is special and unusual (but not weird) about you: they would be fascinated to find out what drove you to do a llama herding course in South America during your gap year – tell them! Reread your personal statement and anticipate the kinds of questions that you might be asked. This is where your personal statement and your interview should mesh. Place signposts in your personal statement that interviewers can pick up on and question you about. Remember, they may be interviewing 40 people in one day, and you can make it easier for them by doing this. You should also keep up to date with medical news stories and developments, as these may be the subject of some questioning.

Dress smartly and arrive in good time. If you are going to be shown around the medical school, remember that this is an opportunity to ask current students any questions that you might have. Don't feel obliged to ask any questions in the interview, and don't ask questions that are already answered in the prospectus. In some ways an interview is a chance for the medical school to assess the potential it has recognised in your application form. It is not an academic test. Treat it as an opportunity to show that you are serious about your career choice, and that you will be a future asset to the profession.

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If you do not think that the interviewers are asking you the questions that will allow you to shine, it is possible to use an answer to one question to lead on to the subject that you would like to talk about. For example, if they have not asked you about your sporting activities, then you can reply to a question about why you have applied to their university to talk about the excellent sporting opportunities available and how that would suit you well in your endeavours as a County Junior Athlete. Whilst it is not a good idea to start rambling off on a complete tangent, a skilful interviewee can heavily influence the direction of the interview.

Most importantly, enjoy your interview. It is an opportunity for the panel to get a feel for the sort of person you are. Be polite and respectful, but be yourself. If you don't agree with something, then say so, as long as you can justify your disagreement logically and concisely. Although it is difficult to predict the exact questions that you will be asked, a number that reoccur time and time again include:

- Why do you want to be a doctor? Why a doctor and not a nurse?
- If you are so fascinated by the human body, why don't you do biology or physiology instead?
- Why do you want to come to this medical school?
- What can you offer the medical school?
- What are the most important characteristics of a doctor? What makes a good doctor?
- Do you know about the medical career structure?
- Do you know what sort of doctor you would like to be?
- What is the one thing you would like to change about the health service?
- Please give me three of your strengths and three of your weaknesses? (Be careful when selecting your weaknesses – you do not want to be so honest that it counts against you. An example would be "I'm prone to being too much of a perfectionist at times. I think that I will have to work on this during my time at medical school so that I can manage the demands of being a doctor without getting too frustrated at the lack of time to do everything quite as well as I would like").
- Please describe a situation when you worked in a team?
- Please describe a time when you have had to make a difficult decision? What is the hardest decision you've ever had to make?
- Questions that try to elicit whether you can think from a doctor's AND a patient's perspective.
- You may be given an ethical situation that you have to go through. (Here interviewers may be looking for characteristics such as teamwork, dealing with uncertainty.)
- You may be asked to talk about a life-changing event.

What if I don't get in?

The number of applicants to study medicine dropped by more than 3% in 2000 to 9291, but increased to 11 030 in 2002. In spite of this and the increased number of places, medical schools in the UK are still vastly oversubscribed. There are often 10 applicants for each place, and only a small fraction of them will make it to interview, selected on the basis of their UCAS forms and references; even fewer will get a place. Oxford and Cambridge have fewer applicants per place, which might mean that, although the academic requirements are high, you stand a slightly greater chance of at least being called to interview. However, not getting a place to read medicine is simply a reflection of the pressure on places and not a great indictment of your character and abilities. Even if you maximise your chances of being selected for interview, you may still be unsuccessful in your application.

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You need to know what to do next. First, think long and hard! Do you still want to study medicine? Medical schools try to select people who will make good doctors and who have the right ability and motivations for studying medicine, but even so some students choose to leave mid-course and others fail exams. The interview panel has a responsibility to make the right decision for the medical school, and you have a responsibility to yourself and your potential future patients to make sure you are making the correct choice. Examine your reasons for wanting to study medicine. If in doubt, or if you have felt pushed in the direction of medicine, it might be better to look at different courses or careers.

If you still want to study medicine, then start by asking yourself why you weren't successful in your application. Did you get an interview? If you did, your school might be able to get some feedback from the medical school. This is unlikely to be in depth, but might give you some useful information. Discuss the prospect of your chances with teachers. Reflecting on your disappointment at this stage may prove difficult, but it is in your interests to be honest and realistic. Think about the possibility of following another course, whether in a related field – for example physiology, pharmacy, physiotherapy, biochemistry – or something totally unrelated. Most universities offer places on degree courses through “clearing”. If your grades are good then many other courses will be open to you. It is possible to reapply to read medicine, but some schools will only consider a second application if you applied there first time round. If you do reapply, your A-level results should be at least as good as the estimates that your school originally made. There are some schools that will consider candidates who are resitting but others do not. Save your own time and energies by asking your preferred schools if they would accept an application from you. This could prevent you from wasting future UCAS choices. It is only advisable to resit exams if you are sure about getting A grades the second time around or if there were extenuating circumstances, such as bereavement or serious illness, in the months preceding your A-levels first time around.

There are a growing number of places available for graduates to read medicine, which means that you could do a degree and decide after graduation whether you still want to become a doctor. Some students start university studying a parallel course, such as physiology, and then apply to switch to medicine at the end of the first or second year when the university has had a chance to measure their potential and character. These students would still have to start medicine from the first year though, and this method of entry is very rare and should not be relied on. Graduates usually follow the full undergraduate medical course unless they can be exempted from part of it because of the nature of their first degree (for example, biochemistry or dentistry). Graduates with a purely arts background at A-level or degree could try to take a medical foundation year (premed year) before the medical course proper. This is not available at all institutions. Graduate entry, however, is one of the ways into a career as a doctor. The BMA, and many other interested parties, have recognised the desirability of graduate entry and, as more places are being reserved for graduates, it is sensible to consider this route as an option.