

Chapter 1 **A challenging career**

The decision to study medicine at university should not be made without a great deal of thought. At the age of 17 years it is difficult to know whether you want to go to university at all, let alone study for at least 5 years. It should be discussed with family and friends but must be an individual decision. Those around you are likely to have differing views; parents and teachers may feel that medicine is a respected profession and possibly encourage you to take this path but some doctors may try to dissuade you. Whilst listening to this general advice, you must try and ignore these opinions and pressures and try to make up your own mind. Without experiencing life as a doctor, it is difficult to know what it will really be like. We all know friends who have avoided medicine following their personal experience with one or both parents as doctors. In comparison many students, after experiencing their own family life, do decide to follow in their parents' footsteps. Although relatively common, do not be persuaded or coerced into studying medicine by your family – it is YOUR decision and YOUR career for the rest of your life.

University is only the tip of the medical career iceberg; the remaining 40 years of medicine can be very different. Whilst this career can be challenging, rewarding and exciting, it can also be hard work, stressful, tiring and, at times, mundane. Have you the right personality, not just for the university days but also the longer term? The majority of sixth form students have no idea what university and a career in medicine will be like, and embark on this journey blinkered by this lack of insight. However, knowledge can be gained by talking to current medical students, career advisors, GPs, hospital doctors, and by reading books on the topic of studying medicine and perusing medical journals. It is also essential to spend time in and around a hospital or GP surgery, known as work experience or voluntary work.

Students have differing motivations for choosing a medical career: family tradition has been discussed, others have experienced medicine as a patient, some have an interest in science, a minority have wanted to become a doctor since the dawn of time and many just feel that they want to help people. It is important to realise that there are other jobs and university courses that would

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fulfil many of the reasons that students often state for studying medicine; a life following one of these different paths could be just as rewarding. Remember that there are a number of wrong reasons for pursuing medicine as a career.

Once you are sure of your future career, you should check that you have the right attributes and qualities. Although academic excellence does not always equate to good clinical skills as a doctor, there are minimum requirements for entry into medical school. If you are not likely to get high grades at A level, it is unlikely that you will be offered a place to study medicine, as there is great competition for places. Apart from academic pursuits, it is important that applicants demonstrate other interests and abilities. Many potential candidates will have a history of sporting or musical interests and

Possible advantages to a career in medicine

- Five years at university
- Almost guaranteed a job following qualification
- Reasonable salary
- Diverse range of specialities
- Respected profession
- A job for life
- Opportunity to work in a team
- Sociable work environment
- Structured career
- Opportunity to work abroad

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these attributes can be important. However, we do not recommend commencing a new hobby for the sake of it, immediately prior to applying!

Whilst deciding upon a medical career, it is important not to be disillusioned by the negative media publicity or the drama depicted in television programmes; these are two ends of an extensive spectrum and the majority of the work of a doctor can be routine. In terms of adverse publicity: doctors have not just started to make mistakes; doctors probably make fewer mistakes now than ever before; the difference is in the expectation and knowledge of the general public. Mistakes are now less tolerated and with the advent of the Internet, patients are more aware of their diseases and also treatment options.

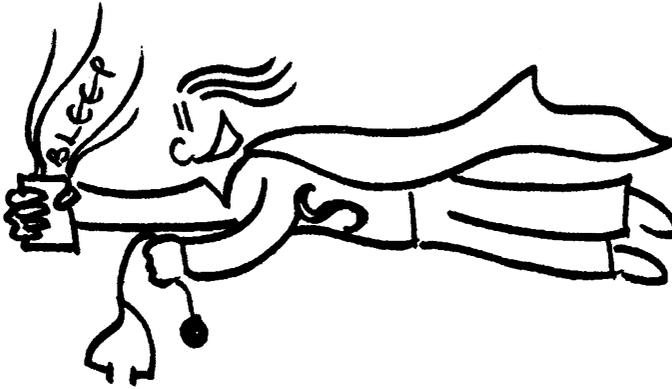
Possible disadvantages to a career in medicine

- Five years at university
- Long hours
- Continued medical education
- Postgraduate exams
- Risk of mistakes
- Stressful times
- Dealing with death/suffering
- Patient expectations
- Media bashing
- Paperwork
- Lack of NHS funding
- Possible job insecurity
- Lack of flexibility in training
- Litigation (being sued)

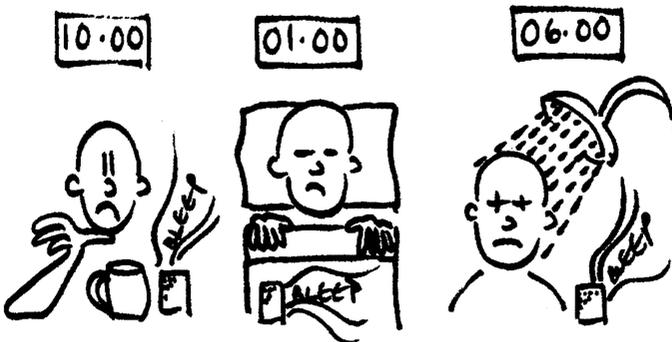
Some colleagues may well know that it is their destiny to become a brain surgeon but the odds are that these people will change their minds over the forthcoming years. The idea of a speciality is different to the reality. For many the final decision to study medicine will be made shortly before sending off the UCAS (University and College Admission Service) form. This decision should be made only after careful thought and research about the career ahead. As previously mentioned, academic success is important but do not be disillusioned if your predicted A level grades are lower than necessary. Remember that these are a prediction following one set of exams. Once the decision to study medicine has been made, then follow through by completing the application process. It is still possible to be invited for interview and

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gain an offer of a place. Once this has been achieved, now is the time to study hard to gain the grades required (usually a combination of A and B grades). If a candidate is unsuccessful in obtaining an offer then it is still important to concentrate on gaining good A level grades. Once the results are published in August it may be possible to find a place at university through the clearing process. This is unusual in the case of medicine but certainly not impossible. A different degree course could be chosen and it may then be possible to change to medicine at a later date. Alternatively it is now possible to apply to a graduate entry course following a first degree. The final option would be to embark on a year off (gap year) and reapply to your chosen universities with your A level grades known.



The job of a doctor can be challenging, rewarding, exciting...



...but also hard work, stressful, boring and routine

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The decision to study medicine is just the beginning. Now it is necessary to decide which university and, for some students, which country. It is likely you will have a great time whichever institution you end up studying at. Remember that not all universities are the same and at some the workload could be greater and the social life less. This is why research before applying could save heartache later. Once at medical school, the majority of those students who wish to become doctors do eventually make it through. Some decide that medicine is not the career for them and either leave or change to another degree. Likewise some students embark on other science degrees and find that medicine would be more suitable so make the change then. If you are unsure about your future career, then a possible option might be to study at a medical school offering intercalated degrees as part of the course. For example, at Nottingham, the preclinical work leads to the degree of Bachelor of Medical Science (BMedSci), followed by a research project in the third year. After this a student could leave the medical school and pursue an alternative career with a degree under their belt.

1.1 A changing profession

Medicine and the health service are currently undergoing radical change. It is unusual for a day to go by without some mention in the press about changes in doctor training and cuts having to be made due to financial problems. Morale is currently at an all time low due to hospital closures and job uncertainty for many healthcare professionals. It is essential as potential future doctors that even at this early stage you stay up to date with the proposed alterations to career structure, training and NHS reforms. Although it may seem irrelevant at your stage in life, the changes may well alter your decision to study medicine. One interesting aspect is that with the increased number of places at medical school and the reduction in the number of training posts, we will no doubt see unemployed doctors for the first time. The days of being guaranteed a job following graduation could be over and there will be greater competition for employment especially in more sought after locations. Modernising medical careers (MMC) is a government-led initiative which has been introduced to make training at all levels more formalised. Following medical school, newly qualified doctors now join a 2-year Foundation programme rather than the traditional 1-year Pre-registration House Officer (previously known as the Junior House Officer year). More information about the current and future training can be found in later chapters. Our recommendation would be to keep up to date with the changes by viewing the British Medical Association and Modernising Medical Careers websites (see Appendix).

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There is no one good or bad reason for studying to become a doctor. It should be a decision that a student is completely happy with and should not be made lightly. For many, a career as a doctor is usually enjoyable and rewarding, but there are times when it can interfere with personal and family life and this can be seen with the higher rate of divorce, depression, alcohol problems and suicide amongst medical practitioners. With the changes in working practice and the reduction in hours, the impact on personal life should reduce. To help make your chosen career less stressful, it is important not to bottle up emotions but to talk through any problems with friends and colleagues and to have other interests outside medicine in order to relax.

PERSONAL VIEW

Adrian Blundell

I do not remember when I decided to become a doctor; my first career ambition was to become a pilot, but was not supported by my parents. They felt being a pilot would be a terrible decision, due to the long hours and the frequent trips abroad and not one that would be favourable for having a family. My parents are not from a medical background and so possibly didn't realise the long hours involved in being a doctor. Nevertheless the idea of being a fast jet pilot was then out of my head. At school, I was fairly good at science and reasonable at the arts. The headache initially was deciding my A levels. Science and study medicine, or arts and study law. (This limitation in my choice reflects my naiveté about the possible careers available!) Science it was and medicine followed.

My school was not particularly generous to me when predicting my A level grades (BBC). This was actually fair, as my results in the lower sixth form exams were quite poor. The most common offer in 1990 when I was applying to medical school was BBB, and for this reason I ended up obtaining only one offer from a London college. Other universities I applied to wrote back with offers for other degree courses but I had decided on medicine and turned these down. I actually contacted the medical schools to ask why they had not offered me a place – one response was that I had not done any voluntary work. This might have been true at the time of applying but I spent a large majority of my upper sixth helping at the local hospital.

Results day arrived; I had achieved BBB. A difficult decision ensued as I had obtained the necessary grades to take the place in London, but I was uncertain as to whether I wanted to spend the next 5 years in London. I really wanted to go to a university rather than a medical school, so I declined the London offer and took a gap year (see Chapter 4).

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I was unsure exactly what to do with this year. I had no guarantees of getting an offer and would not find out for several months. An advert appeared in the local paper for a school leaver with science A levels to work in the field of cancer research at a local pharmaceutical company. I successfully applied for this position and then began the process of reapplication to medical school. Many of my friends spent their year jet setting around the world. Although a little envious, I still had the problem of finding a place at medical school and this prevented me from leaving the country for long stretches. On this occasion I applied to Nottingham University, as I had studied the prospectus and liked the idea of a more modern course. I had never even visited the city before, but on the day of my interview I decided that this was the place I really wanted to spend my university days.

Fortunately an offer appeared through my door 2 weeks later. The rest, they say, is history.

During a gap year, the choices are: work, travel or stay around your home town living off your parents' generosity. The latter is to be avoided and universities will not look favourably at this. Work or travel is the main question. Most students undertake a bit of both. From personal experience this is probably the best advice, although working for the whole year did mean that I had some beer money when I left for university and also a car in which to carry it. The decision is yours! Good luck!