

Medicine: a brief guide

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Medicine: the Pros and Cons

I have now worked as a junior doctor for three years, there have been highs and lows but overall it is a great career (just nowhere near as glamorous as TV makes out!)

Pros	Cons
<p>Rewarding- Genuinely the best bit about my job is the fact that every day I make a small difference to people's lives.</p>	<p>Shift-work- not for the faint-hearted, you do get used to it but working shifts, especially nights, can be difficult.</p>
<p>Challenging- Medicine is diverse, every day you face new challenges and are expected to learn, you never know what's going to happen next and that can be exciting.</p> <p>Academically, it can be challenging too, there is lots of scope for research, learning and teaching and as you advance in your career you have a lot more say in what you do!</p>	<p>Not a way to get rich quick- although doctors earn a good salary you have to work very hard for it and training can take many years. If you want to get rich quickly this is not the way to go!</p>
<p>Diverse- there are so many options for medics- surgery, GP, hospital medicine, psychiatry, public health there are so many options.</p> <p>Even if you decide not to pursue a career in Medicine a medical degree is a really great asset and makes you highly employable.</p>	<p>Stressful- of course there are stresses in any job. Medicine is no different; luckily there are great support networks in place to deal with stress but being a doctor can be difficult at times.</p>
<p>Teamwork and leadership- being a junior doctor you are always meeting new people, making quick decisions and working alongside other people to make things happen. I love being part of a team and the NHS and medicine has teamwork at it's core.</p> <p>If you like being in charge and having autonomy being a doctor allows you lots of opportunities to make decisions.</p>	<p>A lot of studying- I personally liked being a university for 5 years but medicine is an academically rigorous programme. You have to be prepared to commit time to the course. If you do, it's amazing but you definitely cannot get by on no work!</p>
<p>Even though it's nowhere near as glamorous as TV makes out, working as a junior doctor is incredibly rewarding, it is a unique career where you gain privileged insight into people's lives, see them at their lowest and hopefully make them better.</p>	

Medical School at a Glance

Duration: 5 to 6 years

Qualifications- A-levels: AAB- A*A*A

- Subjects: Most universities require a combination of:
- Chemistry +
- 1 other Science (usually Biology) or Maths

GCSEs- Very little emphasis on GCSEs- requirements vary but most require 8 GCSEs at grade 6 (B)+

Admissions tests-

BMAT

- 2 hour paper and pen based test.
- Required by : Oxbridge, UCL, Imperial, Lancaster, Keele, Leeds
- Three sections: essay, aptitude and skills, scientific knowledge and application.
- Scientific and mathematical knowledge only needs to be GCSE level to take the test. More information on the BMAT is available on the website- detailed in the resources section.

UCAT

- 2 hour computer-based test
- Required by most medical schools- used to rank pre/post-interview
- Five domains: verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning, abstract reasoning, situational judgement and decision-making.
- It is important to familiarise yourself with the test format prior to the test-date. I would recommend getting a book of practice questions + timing yourself as the timing aspect is tricky. The UCAT website- listed in resources has detailed explanations of the format, content, links to practise tests and tutorials.
- Other resources- UCAT App, question banks, books.

Courses-

- Generally Medicine is split into 2 phases- pre-clinical and clinical
 - **Pre-clinical medicine:** first 2 years and is focussed on learning underlying science, mostly in a university setting but with increasing integration of early hospital experience.
 - **Clinical medicine:** rest of the course, mostly hospital-based the exact structure varies between universities.
 - **Problem-based learning**
 - Learning is very self-led from the beginning, less lectures, more group work trying to solve problems

- **Traditional, lecture-based learning**
 - First 2 years of some of the more traditional medical schools use lectures to teach with teaching split into different disciplines- anatomy, physiology, biochemistry etc.
- **Case-based or integrated learning**
 - Pre-clinical years are taught using a case-based approach- lectures, anatomy and group work focus on a single case at a time.

Medical School Life-

My five years at medical school were some of the best of my life. Not only do you get value for money, you make friends for life and have the opportunity to get involved in both uni and medical school societies.

The hours-

- **Pre-clinical years-** More hours than other courses, lots of contact time with a mix of lectures, practical sessions, anatomy and time in hospitals/ GP placements.
- **Clinical years-** 9-5 ish in hospital; the expectation is that this is treated like a job. You do a lot of learning on the wards/ in clinics but also have formal teaching to supplement your learning.
- **Intercalation-** all courses offer the opportunity to intercalate. This involves choosing a specialist subject, studying it for a year and gaining a BSc/ MSc/ BA at the end, depending on what you study and when. At some universities, intercalation is mandatory. It can be in a whole range of things allied to medicine or not, and can also be undertaken at another university.
- Intercalation usually takes place after 2nd, 3rd or 4th year depending on your university. During this year, workload is similar to a final year student in any other discipline.

The extracurricular stuff-

- **MedSoc-** Most universities have an active medical society which organises weekly events, free bars, trips, nights out and charity events.
- **Other medical societies-** most societies also have a medical branch which is more relaxed than the official university society i.e. Medics Football/ Rugby/ Netball
- **University societies-** You will definitely have enough time to get involved with other societies too, especially in the first couple of years; there are SO many it's impossible to list them all but it's a good way of making non-medic friends etc.

Interviews-

Nearly all medical schools have a pre-admission interview to check that applicants are well-suited to a career in medicine (and that they are nice people!)

I have been on admissions panels; interviewers are looking for a few key characteristics-

- **Empathy** - are you able to understand people's problems and see them from their perspective?
- **Resilience** - are you able to cope with stress and what mechanisms do you have in place?
- **Team-work and Leadership**
- **Experience and insight** into a career in medicine
- **Motivation** for studying medicine
- **Probity** - are you honest and does what you said on your personal statement ring true- do not lie on your personal statement- interviewers have a really great way of finding you out!
- **Ethical dilemma**- lots of interviewers present you with an ethical dilemma, usually related to medicine. They expect you to weigh up both sides of the argument, thinking about the "four pillars of medicine"- autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice. You can get a lot more information about these in interview preparation books/ websites/ apps.

Some medical schools use panel interviews but most are moving to multiple mini interviews- a series of short interviews +_ group work.

The interview is lots of people's downfall; I would advise that you practice and have a think about some of the common questions you could get answered, generating some good examples of teamwork, leadership, coping with stress etc.

Importantly, when it comes to the interview, it is good to familiarise yourself with example answers but it is also important not to sound too rehearsed; being relaxed is key. The interviewers are not looking to trick you. They may put you under a bit of pressure but usually they just want to get to know you as a person to make an informed decision about whether you would make a good medical student/ you are a good fit for their medical school.

Practising interviews with people in the know is key; if you know any doctors it would be worth asking them to practise with you. If not, I suggest asking at school as they may be able to arrange for some professionals to interview you, giving you a chance to practise and familiarise yourself with the format.

What do Medical Schools Want?

Beyond all the academic stuff and admissions test scores, medical schools are looking for well-rounded people who can show evidence of their interest in medicine and insight into the career.

Work-Experience-

This is probably the biggest thing and the reason why lots of students do not get into medicine on their first attempt. Interviewers want to see that you have really thought about a career in medicine, have experience in medicine or caring professions, have shown commitment to these roles and recognise the challenges of being a junior doctor.

Interviewers also acknowledge that it is very difficult to get experience in hospitals and medical settings due to confidentiality issues so experience in any caring setting is appreciated, examples of relevant experience include:

Hospital-based placements

- MK Hospital- A&E and clinical placements.
- Northampton
- Bedford- only applicable if you live in Bedford.

Volunteer work

- Hospices- Willen Hospice has a programme you can apply for once you are 17
- Summer placements
- Any charity work- especially over a long time demonstrates commitment
- Care-work- i.e. old people's home or working with people with disabilities
- Working with children- teaching or caring role
- Counselling/ support work

Allied health work-

- Experience in pharmacies/ GP/ community nursing/ St John's Ambulance

Other

- Patient participation group
- Medicine society/ club at school
- Relevant EPQ
- Access to Medicine courses i.e. medlink

NB: We appreciate that getting lots of relevant work-experience can be difficult. If I had 2 tips they would be: start early and make sure that your personal statement focuses on what you learned/ gained from the experience rather than just what you did!

Extracurricular Activities-

For any course, admissions teams are looking for well-rounded individuals. They don't expect you to have 100s of hobbies but being able to demonstrate interest, enthusiasm and commitment to something other than medicine is important.

Team-sports, musical instruments, drama, art, stamp-collecting, whatever it is, mention it!

Frequently Asked Questions

How many medical schools can I apply to?

You can apply to four medical schools; because medical schools are so competitive, UCAS only allows you to apply to 4, encouraging applications to another course as a back-up, 5th choice.

When does my application have to be in by?

Like Oxbridge applications, Medicine applications need to be submitted to UCAS by mid-October of year 12. This allows time for the long selection process; offers are usually received by late-spring.

I have dyslexia, can I still study medicine?

Dyslexia is not a barrier to becoming a doctor. I have several friends with dyslexia now working as doctors. Obviously, transitioning to independent study with dyslexia can be difficult but all medical schools have support services for people with dyslexia.

If you have dyslexia you can apply for disabled students allowance (DSA). Depending on your needs you will receive money for:

- Computer equipment
- Specialist software (e.g. Text Help and mind mapping software)
- Dictaphone or digital recorder to record lectures
- Specialist non-medical helper support (such as study skills support, one-to-one support, note-taking, or reader)
- Other costs such as photocopying, printing, and internet

Can I study medicine if I have health concern or a disability?

In short, yes. Medical schools and workplaces welcome diversity. No health condition or disability alone is a barrier to studying medicine. Usually, reasonable adjustments will be made to support you in studying and working but, in order for this to happen, it is important that you disclose this information when you are applying.

What can I do if I do not get into medical school?

This is actually a very common scenario. Medical school is a competitive environment and on average most medical schools have around 10 applicants for every one place although this varies between universities.

Options- what you do next depends on the reason for not getting in:

I got the grades but didn't get offered a place:

- In this scenario you can apply through UCAS clearing; it used to be unheard of, but in recent years a few medical schools have had some places in clearing- don't lose hope!
- If this fails and you are truly set on studying medicine then you have a few options
 - 1. Take a Gap Year in which you gain further experience; if you have had interviews but were unsuccessful ask for feedback on your applications- medical schools will

supply this on demand. You can then use feedback to tailor your subsequent application.

- 2. Accept your 5th choice- Typically, people choose to apply to biomedical sciences or something allied to medicine although some people do not fill their 5th choice. Some courses even let you transfer to medicine after 1 year: more information is available here: <https://www.premedprojects.co.uk/applying-to-medical-school-the-guide-2019>
- If you do chose to accept an offer onto a non-medical course, you can always apply for graduate-entry medicine upon graduation. There are specific graduate programmes which last 4 years and are “accelerated” meaning that teaching is more condensed in the pre-clinical stage.
- All undergraduate programmes also have a small percentage of places open to graduates. As a whole, graduate-entry medicine is much more competitive than undergraduate medicine.

I didn't get the grades- can I retake?

- All medical schools have different policies but failing exams is not a total barrier to getting into medical school. If you are resitting it is important to carefully explore each school's specific resit policies. Medical school admissions processes are very transparent; if unsure contact the school directly and they will be able to give you a clear answer.
- Whilst some students who fail to get the grades resit, others chose to accept their 5th option and subsequently apply for Graduate-Entry Medicine; both are acceptable options.

I haven't done the right A-levels to study medicine, what can I do?

You have a few options in this case-

1. **Graduate Entry Medicine-** discussed above
2. **Medicine with a preliminary or foundation year-** This course takes the form of a five-year Standard Entry Medicine with an additional year at the start, making a six-year course. This course is designed for those who achieved highly at A level but did not take the required science subjects. This extra year gives students the necessary science training to catch up. This course is only available at certain universities.
3. **Medicine with a gateway year-** this course is specifically for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Entry requirements are much lower e.g. BBC but there are very few places available. The gateway year provides students with the scientific knowledge and clinical experience to catch-up with students on the standard programme. After the gateway year, students transfer directly to the standard 5 year programme. **Please see the UCAS website for more details.**
4. **Take a gap year and complete the correct A-levels-** some medical schools are happy to accept A-Levels taken over 3 years rather than 2. If you are going down this route do your research first and apply to medical schools that are okay with this.

Useful Resources-

Admissions Testing:

- UCAT Website : <https://www.ucat.ac.uk/ucat/universities/>
- BMAT Information : <https://www.admissionstesting.org/for-test-takers/bmat/bmat-october/>

General Resources:

- Medical Schools Council <https://www.medschools.ac.uk/>
 - Information about medical schools, entry requirements and applications
 - Booklet detailing exact requirements- <https://www.medschools.ac.uk/media/2357/msc-entry-requirements-for-uk-medical-schools.pdf>
- UCAS
 - Information about medical schools, entry requirements and applications
- HealthcareersNHS <https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/explore-roles/doctors/applying-medical-school/medical-school-courses>
 - Information about medical schools, entry requirements and applications
- The Medic Portal: <https://www.themedicportal.com/application-guide/choosing-a-medical-school/comparisontool/>
 - Tool for comparing medical schools- very useful!
- BMA Studying with Dyslexia <https://www.bma.org.uk/advice/career/studying-medicine/common-challenges-while-studying/studying-with-dyslexia>
 - Information on the support services available for students with dyslexia

Interviews

- Medical Interviews: <https://www.medical-interviews.co.uk/topic/interview-questions-medical-school-interviews>
 - Extensive list of medical school interview questions
- The Medical School Application Guide: <https://themsag.com/blogs/medical-school-interviews/50-medical-school-interview-questions>
 - Extensive list of medical school interview questions
 - Other resources for getting into medical school

Work Experience

- MK Hospital- <https://www.mkuhworkforce.co.uk/work-experience>
- Willen Hospice- <https://www.willen-hospice.org.uk/volunteer>
- Newport Pagnell Medical Centre Patient Participation Group: mkccg.npmcppg@nhs.net
 - Group providing the link between patients and healthcare providers at the medical centre; meet once a month, I volunteered for the PPG and medical school interviewers loved this.