



# **Part 1**

## **Insiders' information**







# Is medicine right for you?

---

Guido the plumber and Michelangelo obtained their marble from the same quarry, but what each saw in the marble made the difference between a nobleman's sink and a brilliant sculpture

Bob Kall

If you were to ask the average student why they chose to put medicine on their UCAS form, the responses would vary wildly. At interview the answers fall in to three major categories:

*'I enjoy science.'*

*'I want to help people.'*

*'I know I would get job satisfaction from a career in medicine.'*

The medical school is going to delve a little deeper when deciding who to give their oversubscribed places to, and will want to know the other reasons for choosing medicine over other career options. Some people may have chosen medicine because of parental pressure, job security in the future, steady income, because family members are doctors or they have the grades, or for the raw sex appeal and kudos that goes with the job! Whatever your reasons, you should certainly discuss the career options with your friends, family, and careers advisors, and reflect upon any experiences you may have had with the medical profession to focus your motivations for such a big leap. Do not let anybody else make the decision for you.

Doctors continue to be held in high regard by the general public. The 2005 MORI public opinion poll reported that doctors continue to be the most trusted profession in the UK. But, with this trust comes

a great deal of responsibility which must be borne out in high professional standards, personal integrity, and a willingness to constantly evaluate the work you undertake, in order to improve care for the patients you and your colleagues treat. You need to have these values both at medical school and upon qualification.

Medicine, like nursing and other vocational courses, makes greater demands of your time whilst at university. There is plenty of time for partying and play, but, unlike other courses, time management and commitment to clinical attachments is a core aspect of study. Turning up to clinical practice worse for wear is not an option when you consider important issues such as patient safety and comfort; the last thing you want as a patient in hospital is a recovering medical student trying to examine your lungs or take a history about your shortness of breath.

Every day, medicine poses unique ethical, emotional, clinical, and cultural challenges – some of which can be stressful and unpleasant. Important ones to consider include breaking bad news, dealing with abusive patients, dealing with uncertainty, feeling frustration at the lack of time or resources available to you, long days and long nights, and your beliefs about abortion, euthanasia, and other controversial topics. Some medical school interviews may even discuss these things with you in an attempt to glean information from you – it is OK to have an opinion but try and remain measured and balanced.

We seem to have painted a pretty negative picture about medicine, but actually everything mentioned above makes it a diverse and stimulating environment in which to work, with fresh challenges every single day of your working life. Treating patients and their relatives can be a huge buzz, especially when you improve their quality of life. At times your ability to intervene will be limited and patients get progressively worse or may suffer pain, but very often it is the care and compassion you can offer the patient that will make the big difference, not the medical intervention.

Every year, large numbers of students apply to enter medical school. There has been a steady expansion of medical school numbers in an attempt to train more doctors, and most importantly to encourage greater diversity in the medical profession. This ease of access is being slowly improved through innovative and intensive fast-track degree courses and access/foundation courses. However, this massive step forward faces a significant challenge with the introduction of top-up tuition fees and the ever-increasing costs of living as a student.

Salaries for junior doctors have increased significantly over the last few years and are set to continue rising, so whilst you can expect high levels of debt, the salary at the other end will enable you to enter the black within a few years of qualification. Indeed, some junior doctors can be paid an annual salary of around £34,000 (before tax). The workload can be very demanding and salaries do reflect the need to do night shifts, work long hours, and face significant time away from family and friends. Saying this, the introduction of the European Working Time Directive (EWTD) has improved the working conditions for doctors.

If your aim is to make huge piles of cash, to run around in a white coat looking like a star from television's *Casualty*, or to demonstrate your academic prowess, you are not likely to enjoy your time at medical school, so make sure you have considered all careers. There are easier ways to make money and the work is not glamorous: 400 blood samples later you'll be cursing those late night *ER* sessions! Your major influence should be dedication to patient care and continual learning, as this is the reality of a career as a doctor. Whilst many of your friends in other professions will be able to relax

## Is medicine right for you?

at the end of a working day or even be earning money, you may finish a long shift only to have to begin your study for the evening, and young doctors frequently spend their weekends working. Whatever combination of reasons has made you consider medicine, remember it is a vocation. Those who enter medical school with a strong commitment to work hard, learn, and serve patients to the best of their ability are the people most likely to find life as a doctor richly rewarding and stimulating.

As mentioned previously, widening participation has been a key agenda for the government, professional bodies, and medical schools, and the Human Rights Act introduced in 2001 offers greater protection than ever before to people who are not treated equally in society. To this end, the General Medical Council (GMC) states that all applicants who have the potential to meet the learning outcomes set by the GMC should be considered for admission to medical school without prejudice. There has been progress over the last few years and medical schools and professional bodies have been trying hard to ensure that students from all backgrounds have fair access. As the medical student population becomes increasingly diverse, it is much easier for mature students and students with dependents, disabilities, and ill health to study medicine than in the past. The enactment of the Disability Discrimination Act in 2004 has ensured that disabled applicants have a fairer chance when applying to study medicine. The Council of Heads of Medical Schools (CHMS) have also joined the GMC in acknowledging that students with a blood-borne virus (HIV, hepatitis B, hepatitis C) should be allowed to study and qualify as doctors with suitable career plans that do not pose a risk to patients. In addition, the Age Discrimination Act came into force in 2006 and may make it unlawful to impose age limits for entry to medicine.



All this said, students with particular needs should consider the medical schools carefully and should liaise with the individual school (contacts at the back of each chapter) to ensure that additional support is provided and that you yourself are happy with arrangements and facilities available.

Medical schools have also made huge steps over the last decade, with ethnic minorities comprising 30% of the intake and 60% of the population are now female. Discrimination does still occur in medical schools and the health service, often in subtle ways, but the BMA, the Department of Health, and all medical schools are committed to equal opportunities for all.

Gay, lesbian and bisexual applicants are often concerned about the implications their sexuality will have upon their career progression and work environment. Whilst some members of the medical profession do have intolerant attitudes towards an individual's sexuality or gender, they are a dwindling breed and all employers should protect you from any form of discrimination you may face. Groups do exist to support doctors and students (see Further Information) and gay and lesbian doctors can be found across all grades and specialties.

Some people know before they start medical school what medical career they want, but it is probably better to remain open-minded as you will have an opportunity to experience a whole range of specialties whilst at medical school and during your first job. Whatever you do, it is vital that you continue your medical education throughout your entire career to keep your skills and knowledge up to date.

It is worth remembering that the decision to study medicine could change your life and many students in your position will be toying with the idea of studying pharmacy, law, veterinary science, and other courses. How then can you be sure medicine is for you?



## The Insiders' Guide to UK Medical Schools 2007/2008

- Speak to doctors – your own GP might give you some good pointers.
- Get some work experience at your local hospital if they allow students to.
- Look at the internet, read books, go to the local library and order other books on the subject – volumes and volumes of information are available.
- First-hand experience in a medical environment is beneficial but if you can't access this, involve yourself in the community, for example by offering to be a helper with charitable organizations.
- Whatever you do, make sure you understand that medicine involves a huge service commitment to other people, and if this is a driver for you then being a doctor may be an ideal job for you.

Finally, and most importantly, the decision to study medicine is yours, and yours alone! The hours will be long, whether it is revising for that clinical exam or writing up another patient log book. You will be at university for longer than the majority of your friends, and whilst the financial rewards are significant in medicine, there is always room for earning more in other professions. Studying medicine will truly be the first step toward a future in which people will rely upon your integrity, your passion for the job and your compassion for serving others. It is a fantastic career, with the potential for tremendous job satisfaction that is worth all the associated stress, study, and pressure.

### Key Points

- Try and get as much information about the medical profession as possible. This will benefit you for your interview and will help you decide whether medicine is actually for you.
- Speak to as many doctors as you can and arrange a placement in a hospital or general practice surgery if possible.
- Ensure that the medical school can facilitate learning if you have any special requirements.
- Discuss the full career options with your friends, parents, and careers advisor, and consider important features such as salary, job demands, and career progression.
- Make the decision based on your own feelings, not what others tell you.