



## An Oxford Medical Student's top tips for getting into medical school

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### Part 1: Is Medicine for you?

#### Introduction

When I was a child, I wanted to be an astronaut. However, when I realised that this job requires rigorous physical exertion, I changed my ambition to astrobiologist (aliens were definitely my thing). As I explored my love for biology through reading, I discovered that what really interested me was a little closer to home – think planet Earth, think humans. So, at age thirteen I finally decided that I wanted to be a doctor.

Between the ages of fourteen and seventeen I focussed single-mindedly on one thing: gaining a place in medical school at Oxford or Cambridge. I pursued this dream so meticulously that by the end of my school career, I had essentially become a professional at getting into medical school. I'd read all the books, watched all the videos and read all the articles. Without tooting my own trumpet too much, let me play you a piece. This series will tackle the ins and outs of the application process, including topics such as: personal statements, work experience, examinations, interviews and extra-curricular activities.

#### Why do you want to study medicine?

Four years into medical school and hearing those seven words still send shivers down my spine. It is

the question that all applicants fear. When I was applying to medical school this was one of the most difficult questions I had to prepare for. I remember recording myself saying my answer out loud, then cringing when I heard it back. I also remember thinking that it was so hard to come up with an original answer - surely there are only a few reasons why people want to become doctors? In one of my interviews at Oxford, I was asked a variation of the dreaded question. They asked: "Why should we ask the question: why do you want to study medicine"?

As it happens, this raises an important point. Answering the question: "why medicine?" shouldn't be a performance. After all, you're applying to be a doctor, not an actor. This question should be one that you ask yourself. Getting a place at medical school is not easy. Also, getting through medical school is not easy either. Your time will consist of long hours in the library, laboratory and ward. You may feel like you're working much more than your non-medic friends, and you'll be held to a different standard too.

The reason I mention all this is not to scare you, but instead to demonstrate a point. The lengthy application process itself is a good test of your desire to study the subject. In my opinion, the most important thing when embarking on the



journey to medical school is to figure out if you truly want to do this, and whether that motivation is enough to get you through years of hard work. So, how do you do that?

Firstly, it's important to ask yourself whether you know what a doctor actually does, and how the UK medical system works. As much as we may wish that being a doctor is like being on House MD, but sadly that is not the case. In my opinion, the best way to figure this out is by talking to doctors you meet during your work experience about their jobs, watching videos made by medics and reading personal essays. It is important to use your work experience time to actually assess whether you enjoy the working environment, and whether you think you may fit in. Work experience is not just a box ticking exercise, and can actually be very valuable to you.

#### When is too early to start preparing?

Whenever students or parents ask me this question, I always give the same response. In my opinion, it's never too early to start doing *something*. It's a lot easier to get off the path to medical school then to get on it at a later date.

Let's say that you are fourteen years old and you decide you want to be a doctor. So, you sign up for some volunteering sessions, you spend a week shadowing some doctors and you read a few science books. Fast forward three years and you decide that medicine is no longer for you. You've not really lost anything having given up some of your time to volunteering, in fact, you've probably gained some life experiences and helped people out in the process. Having read those books will just have helped you become a more well-rounded person, and you're now free to focus on what you really want to do.

Let us now consider the opposite scenario. At age fourteen you aren't really sure about medicine, but at seventeen inspiration has struck and you realise that medicine is your calling. To your dismay, you haven't taken the right A Levels or managed to do any work experience. Work

experience can sometimes take months to organise, and if you're not well connected, you may not have enough time before the application deadline. So, if you think you are even somewhat inclined to medicine, there are some things that you can do to make sure that you're on the right track.

1. Keep up to date with health and science news

It's important to keep well informed, not just for your personal benefit, but for your application too. Having a general understanding of current affairs will be useful for your interviews, your personal statement and even for your Biomedical Admissions Test (BMAT). I recommend building a habit by reading the news at a certain time each day. This is a great habit that you could even maintain into your adult years. When I was in school, I wrote particularly important or interesting news headlines down in a journal, so that I could look back at it during interview preparation.

2. Choose the right A Levels

For the University of Oxford and several other medical schools, it is compulsory to take Chemistry and one other Science A Level. If you are contemplating medicine, it is critical to have these, or else you'll be stuck at the first hurdle. It's my personal view that Biology A Level should also be compulsory for medicine, because in my four years at medical school I have relied a lot more on the knowledge and skills gained during Biology A Level than those I gained from Chemistry. However, the theory is that it is possible to catch up the Biology syllabus in your own time, whereas with Chemistry it may not be.

3. Start volunteering

Not only does a long-term commitment to something look great on your application, it will also help you to become more comfortable with interacting with people of different ages,



backgrounds and abilities. I recommend reaching out to a local care home or nursery.

#### 4. Hone your extracurricular activities

If you can, try to take on some leadership and teamwork roles at school. This could include joining a sports team, running a club or editing for the school's magazine. It doesn't really matter what activity you do, as long as it is something you enjoy. Leadership and teamwork are qualities that will come in extremely useful when working in a multidisciplinary team in a healthcare environment. Also, managing extracurricular activities on top of your academic demands is good practice for maintaining a work-life balance in university and in the workplace.

#### 5. Read some science and medicine books

Regardless of whether or not you include them in your personal statement, reading around the subject is an important part of the application process. Not only will it give you something to talk about at interviews, but it may also give you an insight into the profession and ignite your interest in a particular topic. There are several good books out there, and many recommended reading lists to browse. Three books that I recommend are:

- Also Human: The Inner Lives of Doctors by Caroline Elton
- Life at the Extremes: The Science of Survival by Frances Ashcroft
- Bad Science by Ben Goldacre

In part two we will tackle how to: choose a medical school, write a personal statement, ace the admissions tests and make the most out of your work experience.