APPLYING TO MEDICAL SCHOOL
FROM FOOTHILL COLLEGE

Note: There are many, many excellent resources that cover the medical school application process, selection factors, as well as some of the realistic career-related aspects of medicine. I've written information that is specific for Foothill College and the Bay Area. Both Stanford and Berkeley have pre-med offices staffed by friendly, knowledgeable individuals. I should also note that much of this information can be adapted towards Dentistry, but there are some differences as well. Getting into medical school is very tough, but I firmly believe that if you really want to go to med school, you will be able to. There's a certain game that you have to play, and you have to position yourself well. Most people don't get into med school the first time they apply. It is absolutely essential to learn everything you can about medical school that you can.

Note to advisors: I was at FH from 1993-1997. Please change course numbers, etc., if courses, etc that I refer to are outdated.

OVERVIEW OF THE APPLICATION PROCESS

Your preparation for medical school will start two years before you wish to start medical school. This means that even Freshmen should be thinking about their future career. Briefly, med students starting in Fall 2004 have taken the medical college admissions test (MCAT) in April 2003. They will submit a common application (AMCAS) for medical school in June 2003. After this time, some schools request additional information (e.g., updated transcripts, essays, etc). Interviews would typically run from October 2003 all the way to March or April (sometimes even later) of 2004. At most schools, admissions are on a rolling basis. You could hear about your admissions status as early as December 2003, but many people often don't hear back until the early summer of 2004. This is a very brief overview, but read some of the references at the end for more information.

COURSEWORK AT FH

All medical schools require 1 year of Biology, 1 year of General Chemistry, 1 year of Organic Chemistry and 1 year of Physics. With increasing frequency, many good schools are starting to require calculus and advanced (upper division) biology. Typically, at FH, this is fulfilled by the Chem 1ABC, Chem 12ABC, Biol 1ABC, and Phys 4ABC. I would strongly recommend the Chem 12 series over the Chem 8 series, as the Chem 12 provides much better preparation for the MCAT. Since you will take tons of anatomy and physiology in medical school, the Biol 40 sequence will not help you very much.

The major factors that keep you in the running for medical school are academic – a weighted average of your grades and medical college admissions test (MCAT) scores. The average GPA at most CA medical schools is 3.6 to 3.8. An MCAT score above 30 is essential, and above 32 is very competitive. The nationwide average is lower, but many states (California is an exception) have schools that are easier to get into, but only accept in-state students. This brings down the national average.

Coming from FH, you will be competing with students from big name schools nationwide, like Berkeley, Stanford, Yale, Columbia, etc. Unfair as it is, the reputation of a school does make a

difference in admissions. So, as a FH student, you are somewhat at a disadvantage. Make up for this by doing exceptionally well in your courses and take the most challenging sequences offered. Take heart, though, that the Foothill name is becoming increasingly known around the country. When I interviewed at University of Illinois, my interviewer happened to have worked for the past decade at UCSF. She told me that she would pass on a good word about the strength of Foothill's program to the admissions committee!

The one advantage you do have over students at the big-name schools, is that you have the opportunity to get to know your professors really well. Use that, and get exceptional recommendation letters.

SELECTION FACTORS

Medical schools look at grades, primarily, but they look for additional qualities also. Next to academic factors, letters of recommendation are next in importance. Get letters from individuals who know you well, and who can comment upon how you will become a good doctor. They know how smart you are from your grades. In a close third, is your personal statement and interviews. When you get to this stage, make sure you do very well.

Besides grades, med schools are looking for why you want to go into medicine, and how realistic you have been about a medical career. By working in medical settings, you'll get a first-hand exposure to what being a doctor is like.

The California schools are exceptionally difficult to get into. UCSF is the most competitive medical school in the nation. Stanford has a lower average GPA than UCSF, but they really look for individuals who have demonstrated leadership and other qualities to an unusual degree. Also, I have noticed that the "average" grades for most schools can be misleading. The average is often lowered because schools will fill a certain part of their class with individuals who might have lower grades, but have exceptionally extenuating circumstances that offset the grades. Most medical schools have vigorous affirmative action policies (either on paper, or informally) that affect the competition for schools. Although the UC's stopped affirmative action several years ago, the individual schools are looking for back doors to ensure a racially diverse student body. For med schools, this is more than a nicety; their funding is tied to achieving a certain population of under-represented minorities.

IS MEDICINE FOR ME?

Medical school is a long process. You will be spending four years in medical school, plus three to five years afterwards in residency. Residents, although M.D.'s, make about $30-50k a year, but work 60-90 hrs/wk (depending on the specialty and hospital). Only after residency can you then set up a private practice.

To get a sense of what medicine involves, consider volunteering at a local hospital. The program at SF General Hospital Emergency Room (1001 Portrero Ave, S.F.) is one of the best programs in the Bay Area. But it is also very competitive to land a volunteer position there. You may have to wait a year or so. Other good places are Kaiser Hosp and Oakland Childrens', to name a few.

Another possibility is to work as an EMT. The training is a few months, but you will really be participating in the first-line care of people. By interacting professionally with doctors and nurses, you will get a perspective on medicine that you might not get any other way. Don't think, however, that your EMT coursework will help towards med school.

Talk to physicians whom you know. Don't be afraid to go cold-turkey, either. In my sophomore year, I called up a bunch of doctors' offices, and asked if I could talk with the physician about a career in medicine. In other fields, this is called an informational interview. You might find a couple of physicians willing to frankly discuss some of the most rewarding and demanding aspects of a career in medicine.

ALTERNATIVES TO A MEDICAL CAREER

Caribbean/Offshore Medical Schools: While easier to get into med school in some other countries, you will have an incredibly difficult time getting back to USA to do your residency. Over 96% of US med school graduates obtain a residency position right after finishing med school, but only about half to two-thirds of foreign med graduates obtain USA residencies upon finishing med school. Buyer beware!

Osteopathy Schools: Osteopathic students receive a "DO" degree instead of an "MD," but they are fully licensed and are legally equivalent to MDs. Some MDs tend to look down on Osteopathic physicians, though. Also, for political reasons, it is harder for Osteopathic physicians to go into sub-specialties or into surgery. Purists will argue that there are philosophical differences, but I'll leave that for you to judge.

Dental Schools: Dental schools are similarly competitive as medical schools. Historically, there was a difference between the DMD and the DDS degrees, but not anymore.

Other health-related careers. There are many other careers (such as nursing, medical or surgical technicians, and physician-assistantships) that allow you care for patients, but are much shorter and less demanding than medical school. Consider these carefully, and weigh the alternatives. It really is a personal decision.

Other careers with a Biology degree. With a BA/BS in biology, your career options are somewhat limited. Most of my classmates at Berkeley went to either med school, dental school or grad school. Perhaps the two major career options are to teach high-school biology, or to work at a Biotech company. At a company, you will eventually find that your promotion status will be limited by the fact that you don't have a Master's or Doctorate degree. Usually the project leaders will have a PhD, and the BA individuals are working under their close direction or supervision.

OPTIONS IN A MEDICAL CAREER

Medical practice. By far the most common career pathway, most physicians open up a practice in conjunction with several other doctors. In that situation, you are really running a small business as a contractor. In California, many doctors are employees of health care companies like Kaiser.

Academic careers. Some physicians combine a clinical practice and an academic career, either teaching medical students or doing research. There are a few combined MD/PhD programs for such people.

Public Policy. If you are interested in health policy, some students pursue a masters in public health (MPH) in addition to med school. This can still be squeezed into four years of medical school, but it might take an extra year.

MORE INFORMATION

Everyone should read the following resources:

1. Medical School Admissions Requirements (MSAR): Published by the Assn of American Med Colleges (AAMC), this book has a 2-page blurb on every medical school. Also, it has three chapters detailing how to apply to medical school and selection factors. Available from aamc.org
2. Curriculum Directory: Also published by AAMC, this book details the curriculum of every medical school. It will help you decide where to apply.
3. Internet: www.studentdoctor.net. This website has a lot of informal information on applying and getting through medical school. This is the biggest internet discussion board for pre-meds, medical students, and even residents! It's useful, but I warn you that rumors spread faster than information. The information section is accurate. The discussion boards are moderated for relevance, but not for accuracy of content.
4. Internet: www.amsa.org. The nation's largest medical student organization also has a pre-medical section. They have a listserv which is useful and informative.

There's a lot of information at both Stanford and Berkeley's Pre-med office. It's worthwhile to take a trip across the Bay!

Good luck with applying to medical school!

Rahul Davé.

Rahul is a third-year medical student at the University of Illinois, at Chicago. He is also pursuing graduate school there as well. He attended Foothill from 1993-1997, and then transferred to Berkeley, where he majored in Molecular & Cell Biology. After working for two years in St Louis, he started medical school in downtown Chicago. E-mail him at rahul_dave@yahoo.com.