

Georgetown University Pre-Med Program

Preparing for your Medical School Interview

1. Preparation for the Interview

The purpose of the interview is to find out who you are and why you want to be a doctor. It is also a chance for you to learn more about the medical schools, which will help you later on in making choices. Normally, presentations, tours, and question and answer sessions are part of the interview day.

Prior to the interview, you should study the school's website and their entry in the *MSAR*, and prepare questions you have about their program (see below). You should be well groomed and dress appropriately and professionally (something you would wear to a business interview), arrive on time, and bring with you a photocopy of your application and essay. The interviewer will be evaluating you on your personality, your ability to communicate and relate well to others, and your motivation for medicine. If you are able to talk passionately about people or patients you have worked with, that will help. You can also talk about research experience. It is important that you also talk about your reflections on these experiences and what you gained from them. Interviewers will look for depth and breadth of general knowledge, meaningful experiences and interests in and out of the classroom, and evidence of compassion, creativity, independence and leadership.

One way that you might prepare is to review your resume, essay, and transcript and identify one or two experiences you'd like to discuss from each of the relevant experiences. Ask yourself why you found it interesting or compelling and then reflect on what you learned or gained from that experience. Don't forget to include both intellectual and emotional outcomes. By doing this you will have a ready responses to open-ended questions and you won't waste an opportunity to let the interviewer know something really important and interesting about your candidacy.

While you will probably not be quizzed on current events, it makes sense to keep up with the news on developments in the health care field, so that you can make intelligent conversation. This can be done by reading a good daily newspaper or weekly newsmagazine. You can also review websites with a health care focus but be sure to access high quality resources. Private non-partisan websites, society websites, and health organization websites are a good start.

Examples include:

- The American Medical Association (AMA) (<http://www.ama-assn.org/>)
- The Kaiser Family Foundation (<http://www.kff.org/>)
- Doctors Without Borders (<http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/>)

2. Types of Interviews

Normally, the people who do medical school interviews are skilled at making you feel as comfortable as possible. They will want to give you every opportunity to express yourself to your best advantage. There are several types of interviews, and you should be prepared for anything. The *MSAR* lists the interview format at each school.

1. Informal Interview - The person interviewing you will make you feel relaxed, and may even serve coffee and doughnuts. It might feel more like a friendly conversation than an interview.

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2. Pressure Interview - Some interviews are set up to see how you act under pressure. These are rare but do happen. You are most likely to experience an uncomfortable interview simply because the interviewer does not have particularly good interpersonal skills.

3. Informed Interview - In this type of interview, the interviewer has looked over your essay and our Committee letter and will use this information to direct the questions.

4. Blind Interview - In the blind interview, the interviewer has not read all or part of your folder and has no prejudged opinion. Some medical schools have two interviews, one blind and one informed.

5. Group Interview - You may be interviewed by several interviewers at once, or there may be several candidates interviewed at the same time. Sometimes they ask straightforward questions; in others, candidates are asked to participate in a group exercise.

3. What They are Looking for in the Interview

1. Communication skills: How well do you express yourself? Can you express a point of view convincingly? Are you a good listener? Can you engage in conversational give and take?

2. Personality, evidence of maturity, and the ability to relate to others.

3. Motivation for a career in medicine, concern or compassion for others: Whenever possible use examples from real experiences such as volunteer or work experience in a health care setting. If you can discuss a lab or clinical research experience, do so. Connect that experience to your understanding of the role of science in medicine. Remember to include your reflections on what you learned or gained from your experiences. Be specific about observations about patients or accounts of your work. If you have had a family experience with illness or disability and it was an important part of your motivation, describe how it was so.

4. Depth and breadth of knowledge and interests in and out of medicine.

5. Meaningful experiences in and out of the classroom and in life.

6. Evidence of creativity, organizational skills and leadership: If you have been in many activities, stress those activities that you have enjoyed the most, and where you have made your greatest contribution.

7. Ability to cope with stress: What obstacles have you overcome and how? What would you do differently if you had the chance? What was your hardest decision? Here you may have the opportunity to explain flaws or weaknesses in your record or expand on your credentials. For weaknesses, take the blame yourself. Do not blame the school, the professor, the weather, etc. When asked about your weaknesses, don't fall into the trap of turning your weakness into a strength: "Sometimes I just work too hard!" is a disingenuous response. Be honest about your weaknesses and discuss how you've learned to address them. For example, if you are challenged

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with being organized, what strategies do you use to be organized? Make lists, keep a calendar, etc. For strengths, don't be pompous! However, don't be afraid to brag a bit about your accomplishments.

8. Match for a particular school. Schools will want to know why you applied to their program. Be prepared to enthusiastically say why you would want to attend that particular school, and why you are a good match for it. They may ask you questions such as: If I offered you admission right now, would you take it? Are we your top pick? Be honest in your answer. You should be prepared to accept admission to any of the schools on your list (if this is not the case, you should not have applied). You can also talk about the importance of the interview experience in making your decision. It is absolutely appropriate to tell an interviewer that you'd like to collect more information about schools before having to make a decision.

5. Your Attitude

Be honest in all your answers so that you can defend them convincingly. Ask questions that genuinely interest you, not those which just sound impressive to you. Most interviewers have encountered hundreds of applicants and have heard almost everything. Be confident, but not abrasive. Do not tell them what is wrong with medicine since 1) you have not experienced medicine as a field or career yet and 2) medicine is their life and profession. Medical schools are looking for capable, mature persons. That is what you are and the interview will give you an opportunity to demonstrate it.

Make sure that you are polite and pleasant to everyone with whom you interact. If you are rude to the receptionist on the phone, for example, that could come back to haunt you. Don't criticize the school, or any of the people associated with it when you are there. After the interview, be sure to send a brief thank you note to the faculty or admissions staff who interviewed you. It should be business format, making specific reference to the conversation that you had, and noting why you would want to attend that school, or why you would be a good match for it.

6. Questions You May Want To Ask

You should ask questions at your interviews, both as a way to learn more about the school, and as a way to demonstrate your own interest. During the formal interview(s), your interviewer will evaluate you on the questions you ask as well as the answers you give. Be sure you have read the school's publications carefully, and ask questions to amplify or clarify topics of interest to you. Do not ask, "Do you have a program in neurobiology?" but rather, "Tell me more about your program in neurobiology." Save lifestyle questions for informal conversations with students or other contacts.

The following are the type of question you might ask at the formal interview:

- If I want to have a research experience, will I be able to put together enough time to complete a significant amount of work within the standard four years of medical school? When do students typically do this?
- How does the academic and career advising system work? Who are the advisors?
- Where do students do their clinical clerkships? How do students divide their time between the primary hospital and affiliated hospitals? What advantages does each option afford? What opportunities are there to do a clerkship in a primary care practice?

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- Could you tell me about the use of computers in educating medical students?

In addition, there are many other things you want to learn about a medical school to help you decide if you would like to spend four years there. These can be learned by studying their publications, attending the financial aid session, by informal conversation with students and by your own observation. The following are some things you might want to learn:

- How are students evaluated?
- How diverse is the student body?
- Where do students live? Do they live in close proximity to each other at least the first year? Is there a sense of community among the students?
- Do you need a car?
- How many beds are in the primary hospital? In the affiliated hospitals?
- What kind of patient populations does the medical school serve (affluent, disadvantaged, specialty services only, AIDS, geriatric, etc.)?
- Does the school provide guidance to its students and to its graduates on debt management?

After your interview day, it makes sense to jot down your impressions of the school. You may find it very useful several months down the road, when all your memories of your school visits begin to blur, when you are trying to decide which one to attend.