

## **HEALTH-RELATED AND RESEARCH EXPERIENCE FOR MEDICAL SCHOOL ADMISSIONS**

Many students are rightly concerned about the role of health-related experience and/or research in medical school admission. The following questions and answers about these concerns may help you to put the matter in proper perspective.

### **WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY “HEALTH RELATED EXPERIENCE?”**

The term signifies anything which can give you insight into the health fields. The best experiences provide you with direct contact with ill people, giving you more insight into just how difficult it is to work with the sick. It is a fair test of your resolve to enter the health professions. Some experience might only be observational. In this kind you can learn but you are not doing. Working in a doctor’s office as a receptionist allows you to watch people in a health system: doctors, nurses, support staff and patients. This can be valuable, but it is not the same as being a provider of services. There are many ways to get experience, and you should attempt to gain a wide range of experiences so you can discuss at interviews the changes in the profession that doctors face, the expectations of patients, and the role of medical insurance companies.

### **IS HEALTH-RELATED EXPERIENCE EXPLICITLY REQUIRED FOR MEDICAL SCHOOL ADMISSION?**

In a book of interviews between medical school admission officers and advisers, admission folks are asked about the role of health related and research experience. Here is a sample of responses:

Experience in hospital work or as an EMT, counseling, or any type of interpersonal experience is highly valued. --*Vermont*

It is both useful and important that a student understand the medical profession from first-hand experiences. Hospital or other medical experience, hot-line counseling, EMT, lifesaving or CPR are regarded as equally useful in gaining this experience. Research is a useful activity. --*Northeastern Ohio*

Patient contact is necessary if a student is to be competitive. Exposure to hospitals is one way to develop this experience, but not the only way. Students can have patient contact in hotline counseling, EMT, lifesaving, CPR, etc. Working in summer camps for diabetics, for example, can demonstrate an understanding of health-care and patient issues. Big Brother/Big Sister programs can establish that one knows how to interact in a caring way. Research can be a valuable experience but does not substitute for patient experiences. --*OHSU*

It is important for applicants to have medically-related experience preferably involving patient contact. Other interpersonal experience helps, and evidence of altruism means a great deal. --*New York Syracuse*

There is no specific requirement for health-related experience, nor is one preferred, but the committee would question an applicant who had no exposure to the field. --*Tufts*

Non-academic experiences are not required, but it is a plus for a candidate to have experience in research, work in a hospital or other health related setting, or evidence of leadership or organizational ability. *Chicago Med.*

Clinical experience is very important. The applicant should know what she/he is getting into. The experience should involve direct patient contact, if possible. Community service work is also considered, as is scientific research. -- *Maryland*

**Conclusion:** It may not be explicitly required but you are foolish not to have substantial experience to test your own interests and as an expression of your concern for others. Note the word “altruism”; it is an important characteristic for physicians. Note also “community service,” “interact in a caring way,” and “interpersonal experience.”

## **WHAT KIND OF HEALTH RELATED EXPERIENCE SHOULD I GET?**

What kinds of people do you care about? If you had all the time in the world, how would you participate in community events and community problems?

Ideally your experience will be an expression of your interests and a variety of experiences may very well coalesce around the same general area. If, for example, children and children's health issues are appealing to you, you may very well want to be involved in Special Olympics, coaching, a children's nursery, the WIC Program (Women, Infants and Children nutritional program). You can learn from each of these possibilities.

Don't assume that you should try to turn yourself into a copy of what everybody else is doing. Rather, make yourself unique in the way you express yourself, unique in the collection of experiences you have.

## **WHERE DO I GET HEALTH RELATED EXPERIENCE?**

The Volunteer Connection (741-6000) is a good place to begin. The Volunteer Connection is a local United Way organization that maintains a database of volunteer positions. There might be organizations like this in your hometown as well.

If you cannot find such an organization, consider going to the Director of Volunteer Services in hospitals, health related agencies, etc. Look in the telephone directory.

If you have bona fide skills, try getting a paid job: Certified Nurse's Assistant (CNA), Phlebotomist, EMT, etc. (LCC and other organizations provide training for some of these positions).

Be imaginative:

The Student Health Center has a peer-health education program.

Some research options are health-related: smoking cessation studies, etc.

Public Health Department (a subdivision of Health and Human Services in Lane County).

The UO Career Center has internships in the community during the year and during summer breaks, as well as a mentor program.

Volunteers in Medicine has opportunities for committed volunteers.

See our volunteer opportunities handout on the Academic Advising (<http://advising.uoregon.edu>) Pre-Health web pages under "Volunteering" on the "Prepare for Health Professions" page.

If you cannot imagine yourself in a helping situation, you should probably do some serious rethinking of your professional goals.

## **WHY IS THIS KIND OF EMPHASIS MORE IMPORTANT NOW THAN IT WAS WHEN MY OLDER BROTHER WENT TO MEDICAL SCHOOL?**

One of the reasons is that many medical schools (OHSU included) have changed their approach to medical education in the last several years, and as a consequence, students are engaging in patient-related work during their first year. Many schools have found that the student with prior experience makes the transition to this role with patients more easily than the student with no patient experience.

Another reason is the public has been demanding that physicians have a people-directed attitude. Yes, the public wants science-competent people, but they also want people-competent people. Strong communications skills are looming much larger on the attribute list of successful candidates.

Still another reason for this emphasis is that there are so many applicants per spot, medical schools can expect more of each one.

## **ARE THERE OTHER WAYS TO LEARN ABOUT THE HEALTH PROFESSIONS?**

Don't forget that you can also learn a good deal about the health system of the US and the profession you are interested in by reading. Try the periodical Room of the library. The Guide to Periodic Literature lists magazine article titles that are very current. Watch television reports and newspaper articles on health care reform. Much information is available on the internet. Reading will not substitute, however, for direct experience.

## **ARE THERE OTHER ACTIVITIES THAT ARE IMPORTANT?**

Yes, note that "leadership," "organizational ability," and "interact in a caring way" were all mentioned in the sample statements on page 1. As always, be careful that you don't assume they will replace a solid academic record.

One of the reasons that activities are important is that you demonstrate with activities and a solid record that your school work does not demand all of your time. And you need more time once in the medical school grind.

Think about UO clubs (including Asklepiads), honoraries, and service organizations.

## **HOW MANY HOURS SHOULD I GET?**

There is no set number. The *MSAR* recommends that you get health-related experience over the summer for your first three years of pre-medical work and during the school year for at least a couple of years. If you can't get this much, get what you can. Remember that if you apply and are not accepted the first time around, you can get further experience in health-related areas to enhance your application and apply again. Your exposure to health-related fields should be substantial.

## **WHAT ABOUT THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE TO WORK TO SUPPORT THEIR COLLEGE EDUCATION?**

Difficult question and a very real one. If you cannot get experience during the regular school year, then assume that when you are working full-time during the summer, you will get some kind of people-experience during the weekends. If even this is impossible, then the burden falls on you to prove through words alone that your interest in medicine are well founded. Older students with family obligations have been able to prove this through their family experiences with the medical system. For younger students it is difficult; you become an orange in a basket of apples, and comparative judgment is impossible to make.

## **WHAT IF I WAIT TO APPLY UNTIL I GRADUATE (IN SOME JUNE OR ANOTHER) AND THEN GET EXPERIENCE WHILE I AM APPLYING TO MEDICAL SCHOOL?**

Many students are choosing to apply after they graduate, rather than during their senior year. What you must remember is that you are advised to file your applications during late June or Early July and whatever experience you gain after that time will not be reflected on your application. It is conceivable you would have experience prior to your interview—if you get an interview—but it is rather late in the day.

Remember, as well, the experience should have helped you to form your ideas about a medical career, and not be just an after-thought to please an admission committee.

## **IS RESEARCH EXPERIENCE REQUIRED?**

Research is seldom required, but it is extremely valuable; you develop important skills and it is possible to develop a source for a letter recommendation. (This is beyond the three academic letters. Often the very best letters are from those persons you know as both an instructor and a research supervisor.) Many medical students have told me that they were invited to participate in exciting research at medical school because of their extensive research at the UO. The University of Oregon provides remarkable opportunities for students. The Biology Peer

Advising office usually has information on summer research possibilities both on-campus and elsewhere. Furthermore, some schools are keenly interested in students as potential researchers.

### **HOW DO I KNOW WHICH SCHOOLS VALUE RESEARCH?**

The same book which quotes admissions officials on patient experience often, but not always, comments on research experience. Note the number of comments on page 1 that express favorable attitudes toward research.

### **WHAT ABOUT M.D./PH.D. PROGRAMS?**

Considerable and significant research is required for M.D./Ph.D. programs. Students interested in these programs often do not apply until the fifth year. They either graduate and begin the application process while working at their research or they delay graduation.

### **HOW DO I IDENTIFY M.D./Ph.D PROGRAMS?**

There is a list in the *Medical College Admission Requirements* book, or visit the AAMC website: <http://www.aamc.org/research/dbr/mdphd/programs.htm> Most programs now have a listing on the College's website.

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