How To Get Into Medical School

This seems like an odd post for a website primarily aimed at doctors and those already in the pipeline to become doctors. But I have a surprisingly high number of pre-med students who read the blog, and I hope this post will help pre-meds find the blog long before they take on $400K in student loans to become docs. So, here are the “secrets” to getting into medical school.

1) Get better at standardized tests.

If you didn’t do well on the SAT or ACT getting into college, you’ve got a lot of work ahead of you. Taking standardized tests is an essential skill for pre-meds, medical students, resident, and even practicing physicians. The tests never end. You might as well learn how to deal with them. It helps to be smart, but there are real skills to test-taking that anyone can use to improve their scores from subadequate to adequate, adequate to good, and good to great. Taking every MCAT practice test you can get your hands on is a good start. But read the answer explanations, even for the ones you got right. You’ll learn a lot about how to make and take a good test. Those skills will help you to do well on the MCAT, the USMLE Steps I-III, the shelf exams, the inservice exams, the board certification exams, and the re-certification exams.

2) Work harder AND smarter.

You’re going to study more in medical school than you did as a
pre-med. You’ll work even more hours as a resident. If you don’t like going to school, studying hard, and working hard now, you might as well get out while you still can. There are lots of great careers out there where you can make decent money without killing yourself. But at the same time, start practicing “high-yield” reading and learning strategies. If you’re still reading the entire textbook twice for the class, you’re doing it all wrong. Eventually, there will be so much material that you cannot read it all once, much less twice.

The “required” textbooks for medical school have their thickness measured in feet, not inches. You simply cannot read them all word for word. Read the summaries. Read the section headings. Look at the charts, diagrams, and figures. If there’s something you don’t get, read that section. You’ll spend less time studying and end up with a better understanding of the material and how it fits together.

3) Work on your social skills.

Although many doctors are introverts, there is little room in medicine for those who cannot communicate effectively with others. Most doctors spend their entire day communicating. If you aren’t listening to and talking to patients and their families, you’re communicating with staff and other physicians or generating lengthy written notes. This isn’t a career for those who prefer to work by themselves. You might think that you can go into radiology or pathology or some other “non-patient-care” specialty, but I’ve got news for you. The jobs where you don’t interact with other people on a routine basis are few and far between. People who can’t communicate effectively are pretty readily weeded out using letters of recommendation, essays, and especially interviews.

4) Check the boxes, but use them to your benefit.

There are sections on every medical school application where
you detail your extracurricular activities, including leadership opportunities, health care orientation activities, and service activities. You have to check these boxes to get into medical school. Many pre-meds check them JUST to get into medical school. I suggest you use these activities to see if you really want to be a doctor. If you don’t like being a leader, you aren’t fascinated by most aspects of health care, or you don’t really like helping other people with no thought of reward, you might want to reconsider your desire to go to medical school. It might not be for you, and that’s okay.

Also keep in mind that you don’t need to spend a bazillion hours at each activity. So you shadowed a doctor all day, every day for two months. Did you really get all that much out of that last 59 days? Far better to shadow four different doctors for 4 hours a piece. You don’t have to work as an ER clerk for 3 years or be the president of 6 different clubs on campus.

5) Be interesting.

I served on a medical school admissions selection committee as a 4th year medical student. Everyone that reached our committee had adequate MCAT scores and grades. All of them had checked all the required boxes. We still had several hundred applicants for 100 slots. At that point it came down
to who was really interesting. Being a biology major and the president of the pre-med club didn’t carry you very far in those discussions. But if you were a Russian emigrant who had started an orphanage across the Mexican border for children whose parents were killed in drug wars all while playing as a linebacker on the college football team AND STILL earned solid MCAT scores, received good grades, and checked all the pre-med boxes, then you were a shoe-in.

Don’t try to conform to the “pre-med model.” Be yourself, and be outstanding at it. Play up whatever makes you unique, whether it is your race, heritage, extracurricular activities, age, prior career, or interests. You have to sell yourself in the application and at the interview. It’s not enough to be Hawaiian or a famous jazz musician. You need to be able to explain how your experiences will make you a better doctor and contribute to the education of your classmates and the care of your future patients.

6) Apply early and perfectly.

Applying late is like walking to the batter’s box with two strikes already against you. Not only have you missed out on many opportunities for interviews (and acceptances), but you’ve demonstrated a lack of ability to plan ahead and a lack of attention to detail, two essential qualities in good physicians. Likewise, your applications should be perfect. If you haven’t had several people (preferably those who know how to spell) read your entire application, not just the essay, you’re doing yourself a disservice. It really does matter.

7) Play the numbers game.

I’m always appalled to see people that only applied to one medical school. That’s a losing strategy. Granted, the better you are as an applicant, the fewer schools you can apply to. But I would put the minimum at 10. Sure, it’ll
cost you $100 a piece to apply, but not getting in until next year may cost you hundreds of thousands of lost earnings. Don’t be penny-wise and pound-foolish. If you’re not a great applicant, 20 or even 30 schools isn’t a bad idea. You can always turn down interviews if you get too many. Save your money by turning down interviews (if you are so lucky), not skipping applications.

8) Apply to the right schools.

Your biggest advantage is probably at your in-state school. They’re often required to take a certain number of people from their own state. But there aren’t many states with 10 in-state medical schools. So how do you decide which out-of-state schools to apply to? Take a look at who they’ve taken in the past. If a school traditionally takes 95% of its students from its own state, don’t apply there. If 2/3rds of the class consists of out of state students, that’s probably worth the $100 to apply. Likewise, apply to someplace where you’ll be a little unique. If you’re from Louisiana, someone in Colorado might think that’s pretty cool, but you’re not going to stand out much applying in Alabama.

Likewise, apply to a range of schools. No matter how great of an applicant you think you are, be sure to apply to some “back-up” schools. It might be humbling to see how many of these don’t invite you to interview. If you aren’t an above average applicant, consider also applying to DO schools or even Caribbean medical schools. Although some DO students choose their schools out of a desire to learn osteopathic manipulation techniques or an interest in a “more holistic approach”, most are well aware that the average scores and grades at a typical DO school are lower than at a typical MD school. Both alternatives will give you difficulties in applying to competitive residencies, but if that is your only medical school acceptance, I’m confident you will prefer it to the alternative.
If you are lucky enough to get into a lot of schools, do yourself a favor and give serious consideration to the least expensive one. What you learn in medical school depends far more on you than it does on the school, and escaping with only $100K in debt instead of $400K will make a huge difference in professional and personal opportunities in the future.

Docs- Add your own tips for pre-meds in the comments section below.