

## APPLYING TO MEDICAL SCHOOLS: TAKING THE BIG STEP

Lowell House Premedical Committee • 23 February 2009



### Should you apply to medical schools this year?

Medicine can be a very rewarding career choice, but not for everyone. Are you convinced that a career in medicine is right for you? Can you imagine practicing medicine for the next 30 years? What fields of medicine interest you? Have you spent time in clinical settings and talked to doctors about their lives? What kind of life do you envision outside the hospital or clinic? Have you considered other health-related careers? public health, public policy, research, teaching  
It is extremely expensive (~\$1000-\$3000) to apply to medical schools.

**We strongly encourage you to apply when you will have a good chance of being accepted. This usually means B average or above, especially in premedical courses, and solid MCAT scores (10+ in each subject).** We can advise you of specific steps you may take to increase your chances.

### Should you wait? Have you considered taking time off after college?

Almost everyone who "takes time off" before medical school finds it to be a good decision. Why might you want to consider it? What might you do during this time?

- Explore/Affirm your interest in medicine (public health project here or abroad, clinical research, shadowing, volunteer)
- This may be your best chance to explore interests outside medicine (business, traveling, fellowships, etc.)
- Fulfill premedical requirements
- Improve your academic record (especially science GPA, MCAT score)

Average matriculant age 1992-2002: ~24.5.

Quite a few medical schools do not grant deferrals. Our guideline: apply **later** – you won't decrease your chances of admission (you will likely increase them).

### What do medical schools consider in an applicant?

- How informed is your choice of medicine as a career? – have you had medically-related experiences?
- Academic record (courses, GPA, MCAT scores)
- Character -- personal statement, interview, recommendations
- Extracurricular activities, community service
- Potential for service to underserved communities
- U.S. and state residency status

### Premedical Course Requirements

In most cases, premedical course requirements must be finished before matriculation. Every school has different guidelines; these can be found in the Medical School Admissions Requirements book published by the AAMC (OCS, or at the Coop).

A good place to start is the **OCS website**:

<http://www.ocs.fas.harvard.edu/students/careers/medicine.htm>

- guidelines for how premed requirements can be met at Harvard College
- sample course tracks for completing all the requirements
- Biology/Math requirements & how AP credits count for different schools

#### GENERAL REQUIREMENTS FOR MOST SCHOOLS

- 1 year biology (w/lab both semesters)
- 1 year general chemistry (with lab)
- 1 year organic chemistry (with lab)
- 1 year physics (with lab)
- 1 year of English

### The MCAT

The MCAT is a required entrance exam for medical school. It is offered several times a year, on a computer. We strongly encourage students to take the exam in April or May to apply this cycle, though it is possible to apply this cycle with a summer exam if your application is otherwise stellar. The primary disadvantage of a late summer exam is that score reports are not available until the fall, which can disadvantage you by delaying your application processing medical schools with rolling admissions.

Official information & registration: <http://www.aamc.org/students/mcat/registration.htm>

(Register approximately 12 weeks prior to the desired test date)

A handful of schools (in California) will only accept MCAT scores within two years of test date, but most schools will accept scores for 3 years or more. Bottom line: don't take MCAT too early. OCS has compiled a list of the variations in policy between U.S. medical schools with regards to MCATs and deferrals.

#### MCAT Study Tips:

- **PRACTICE:** Look at the sample MCAT questions online at <http://www.aamc.org/students/mcat/start.htm#sample>. Additional practice exams can be ordered in paper form or taken online. This is the best thing you can do to learn about the exam and identify your weaknesses. Make note of problems where you are uncertain and hone in on weak areas.
- **COMMERCIAL COURSES NOT NECESSARY:** Your premedical courses at Harvard will give you some preparation, though these courses are generally not designed exactly for the MCAT. Some students like to take Kaplan or Princeton review courses. These courses offer comprehensive review of the material and practice exams. However, these courses are expensive and they are by no means necessary for (or a guarantee of) success.
- **PLAN AHEAD:** Preparation will take time. If you plan to take the April exam, expect to spend several hours a week in February and March and then more as the exam approaches. Anticipate this time and be careful not to overload yourself with excessively demanding coursework or extracurriculars.
- Take multiple full-length practice exams under exam conditions (timed) at the latest during the week before the exam.

Plan to take the MCAT only once --- the MCAT has a "full disclosure" policy --- schools receive all of your scores.

#### Letters of recommendation

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At least 2 from science professors/TFs, at least 1 from a non-science professor/TF, at least 1 from your concentration (tutorial adviser, thesis adviser, etc.), at least 1 from an employer or an extracurricular activity sponsor. Letters from friends, family, clergy are less helpful.

- Seniors—get TF/professor letters **before** leaving Harvard. Confer with letter writers soon after a course is completed. The recommender can revise the letter later if necessary. Recommenders are often difficult to track down later.
- Be sure to give each recommender a copy of the Lowell House waiver form (available at <http://lowell.harvard.edu/administration/forms.php>, "Form for Recommendation Requests and Waivers") as well as a stamped envelope addressed to the Lowell House Office.
- Make an appointment with your potential recommender. Ask, "Would you feel comfortable writing a supportive letter of recommendation for my application to medical school?" Bring with you: copies of your work (papers they graded, exemplary research projects) and a brief letter detailing your interactions with them/reminding them of the things you hope they will mention in the letter. Try to avoid giving out copies of your CV as this tends to produce "resume review-type letters, whereas you want to get personal letters from each recommender.
- Make sure to set a mutually agreeable deadline for receipt of the letter. That way you can feel comfortable reminding the recommender after the deadline. **THE FINAL DEADLINE FOR LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION FOR 2009 APPLICANTS IS MAY 13.**
- You will receive confirmation emails from the House Office when letters are received. Save these for later reference.

#### AMCAS Application – the "primary" application service

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A standardized, online application service that you will use to apply to most medical schools. You will submit your grades, scores, list of extracurricular activities and the dreaded "med school application essay" to AMCAS and they will distribute this information to schools of your determination. The med schools will use the AMCAS application information to screen applicants for secondary application. AMCAS is the major component of application at most schools!

You can access the AMCAS application at <http://www.aamc.org/students/amcas/start.htm>.

When completing the AMCAS application, timing and diligence are equally important. Be sure to submit your AMCAS application by the end of June. Late summer applications are a disadvantage at many schools, especially if they have rolling admissions. Be prepared to write multiple drafts of your essay and get feedback from several people, especially your pre-med tutor. Be sure to proofread before submitting.

A handful of schools do not use AMCAS. To apply to these schools, you may need to contact each school individually to obtain an application.

### Other Comments

Clinical experiences: you should definitely have some clinical exposure prior to applying to medical school. Talk to ANYONE with clinical responsibilities on the premedical committee, not just your advisor. Non-resident tutors are a great resource – you can find their biographies and contact information in the Lowell SCR directory (online).

Establish statehood residency requirements. Settle U.S. citizenship/residency issues. International students: very difficult to get into U.S. medical schools—some extra planning is required.

Financial issues: discuss with parents (who are usually included in financial aid decisions, whether or not you are “independent”). Fix any credit problems. Average debt of medical school graduates is about \$130,000. Residents now make about \$30,000 to \$40,000 a year.

### The Lowell House Premedical Committee and You

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Seeking advice is a critical component of any career in medicine. Get to know your premedical committee! We will help you with advice about medical school essays, deciding where to apply, mock interviews, making decisions about programs. The “Dean’s Letter” is written by the committee. Each applicant is assigned two pre-med advisors, a resident tutor and a non-resident tutor. Advising assignments may be found at: <http://lowell.harvard.edu/advising/pre-med.php>

**PREMEDICAL QUESTIONNAIRE: Part I is due on April 22<sup>nd</sup>.** Expect to spend about 12-20 hours on completing this. Do this earnestly – it will greatly help you complete the AMCAS application (including your Personal Statement essay) and prepare for med school interviews. Be specific – your responses greatly help us write your Dean’s letter.

**COMMITTEE INTERVIEWS: April 26 and/or May 3, 2009** with the Premedical Committee. We’ll give you candid feedback about your application and how you might improve it and help you with your schools list. *You must have a meeting for us to write a Dean’s letter.*

### DEAN’S LETTER

The dean’s letter is a composite letter of recommendation authored by the Lowell Premedical Committee. It is based upon your letters of recommendation, your thoughtful responses to the Premedical Questionnaire Part I, and our personal knowledge of you. Like your other letters of recommendation, it is confidential.

Lowell House mails the Dean’s Letter and your designated letters of recommendation to your med schools on or before August 15. Note that this is one month prior to the college deadline of September 15 determined by OCS.

Why do you need to turn in your letters of recommendation by May 13 if we don’t mail until August 15? During the intervening months, your application materials are carefully crafted into a Dean’s letter by various members of the premedical committee, edited extensively by the resident tutors and senior tutor, and processed by the administrative staff in the House Office.

### OTHER

As an alumnus/ae you will **always** be able to work with the Lowell House Premedical Committee. Contact us by February of the year in which you wish to apply.

Make sure that we always have a current phone number and email for you. Seniors and alums: be sure to keep us informed about your plans by emailing [lohomed@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:lohomed@fas.harvard.edu)

Email address reserved for premedical-related correspondence: **[lohomed@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:lohomed@fas.harvard.edu)**

Email sent to this address will be read regularly by your resident tutors (Mary, Ilya, Ben, and Marlys). To ensure timely responses to your emails, please use this address rather than our individual addresses.

### Last bit of advice

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- Each person has individual concerns as a medical school applicant. Beware of generalizing from anecdotes from your peers.
- Stay extremely organized. Follow deadlines. Allow time for completing application materials during the year.
- Try to keep a good perspective on the whole medical school application process. It can be scary and overwhelming at times, so don’t hesitate to come talk to us!

Important Websites:

**<http://www.aamc.org/students>**

- MCAT information, sample questions, registration
- AMCAS information and online application
- advice on when to apply, preparing to apply
- official list of medical schools & links
- information on combined degree programs

**<http://www.ocs.fas.harvard.edu/students/careers/medicine.htm>**

- meeting premed course requirements at Harvard
- guidelines for Harvard students completing AMCAS application
- advice for getting recommendations, writing a personal statement, interviewing, and much more

**<http://lowell.harvard.edu/advising/pre-med.php>**

- Advising assignments
- Links to OCS and AAMC
- Links to waiver forms and meeting handouts