

On Starting Medical School

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Keywords: medical school, mindset, self-reflection

INTRODUCTION

When I first found out that I was accepted into medical school, I felt like I was on top of the world; I was overjoyed and extremely excited to pursue this rare and special opportunity. I didn't think for one second of all the endless hours, personal changes, and emotional turbulence that would follow that 8.5 x 11 piece of paper that explained my fate. I figured that I worked hard in high school and undergrad and this would be just another step in my education. Obviously, medical school would be difficult, but it's just school—I had been studying my entire life, so how different could medical school actually be?

ANALYSIS

In your first semester of medical school, you are expected to take Biochemistry and Anatomy together. I still remember my first day of class: there I was, sitting in a Biochemistry lecture with 120 other medical students. The class was structured very similar to a college course—there was a PowerPoint presentation posted online for each lecture that contained all of the information you needed to know for the test. Just study the PowerPoints, and you will be fine. Thankfully, I had taken a similar course in undergrad so I was confident that I already knew a lot of the information. This was going to be a piece of cake.

I could have never been more wrong. Within just one hour, my professor had reviewed almost everything I spent months learning in college. I spent so many hours trying to memorize this information, and he reviewed it like it was common knowledge. Immediately I felt uneasy—I had assumed this first semester in medical school would be tough, but at least I had a cushion of knowledge from college that would help me transition. But all of that flew out the window when I realized that cushion only lasted for one day! And just like that, the true weight of medical school was finally starting to set in.

To make matters worse, my next class was Anatomy—now I felt completely confused because I had never studied human anatomy before, and I was already nervous about having to dissect a human corpse in order to learn the information. What if I fainted in front of everyone? Do I really want to start off my career by embarrassing myself and proving I'm too weak for medicine?

So there I sat, listening to the professor emphasize the importance of knowing and understanding anatomy regardless of what field of medicine each of us chose to pursue. He must have known that each of us was nervous about the lab portion of the class, so he reassured us by claiming it would take us "ten minutes" to

overcome the fear of dissecting a human body: “I promise you, after ten minutes you won’t even notice it anymore.” And with that, he simply moved on to teaching us the anatomy of the spine.

I felt like I had just been dropped into the deep end of the pool and told to swim. It just seemed so ridiculous how he breezed over our emotions and acted like it was nothing to cut up a dead body. And then he just started teaching and quizzing us, expecting all of us to have read the information beforehand and already know it. Wasn’t there going to be some grace period, some introduction to help me get my feet wet before just diving into the material? I looked at the clock: it was only 10:30 a.m. on the first day of medical school, and I already felt behind, lost, and confused. It finally hit me: I completely underestimated medical school. I was a fool to think it would be just another step in my career, and that the studying I had done in my life would be similar to the breadth of knowledge I would be expected to accumulate. I was no longer learning just to get by on an exam or to do well in school; whether or not I understood this material would determine my ability to treat patients in the future.

As time went on, I slowly learned how to study and started accepting the dedication, hard work, and sacrifice that medical school demands. During my second semester, I applied to be on the Committee of Admissions, in which I would help interview new applicants for the School of Medicine. During my interview, the Dean of Admissions had asked us all a question that I had never considered before: *How will you deal with the fact and pressure that you are holding an individual’s life decision in your hands?* Before that moment, I had never thought that by interviewing someone for medical school I would be altering that person’s life. This was also the first moment that I realized that since the first day of medical school my life had been completely altered in ways that I never would have imagined.

The more I reflected on my time in medicine thus far, the more I discovered how my personality and mindset had already changed. I realized that medical school is unlike anything else that an individual will do in her life. It’s not just another step in one’s education; it’s not just a “career path.” It is truly a life-altering decision. From the moment we enter medical school to the moment we become practicing physicians, and arguably even afterwards, our lives are completely planned and structured. We are no longer the people we used to be, and we have little time to develop into the people we would like to become. The mental and emotional switch that must occur within ourselves in order to be successful physicians isolates us from those outside of medicine. We will see and do things in our lives that very few in this world will ever get to do. Under the Hippocratic Oath, we are obliged, even if against our moral will, to help those in need, whether or not they are our patients or if we are supposed to be working that hour; we are required to keep an open, unbiased, mind toward everyone we encounter. And we are doctors from the moment we enter medical school until the moment we retire.

I won’t lie—there were times during my first year of medical school when I questioned whether this is truly what I want to do. I completely underestimated the time, money, and mental toll that this career choice would take on me. I thought about all of the extremely important family events that I was missing and would miss in the future as a doctor; I thought about the ways in which my life was already completely different than my friends’ who were the same age as me. I had no time to go out and meet people, and I had nothing to say to those who could never understand what I do and why I am so busy. I couldn’t look at people the same way; I had less patience than I did before, and even though I had only been in school for one year, I had a brand new definition for suffering, after seeing what so many patients had to endure.

But what upset me more than this realization was the way that everyone around me was acting, as if they were totally okay with everything—why weren’t other students acknowledging that they too were unprepared for all of these changes? I knew I couldn’t be alone in my feelings, but if we are going to be in this together, why is no one else willing to admit that they too feel lost?

CONCLUSION

One of the most important things I have learned in medical school is that self-reflection is an amazing and vital tool for any successful physician. Given the multitude of emotions that we experience every day, it is extremely important that we introspect and come to terms with what is happening around us. Sometimes it is difficult, even embarrassing to admit how you are feeling when faced with the responsibilities of a medical student. No one likes to admit that they are lost or confused, especially when everyone around them refuses to do so. But in all reality, medical school is a journey, and more than the knowledge base, it forces us to multitask, teaches us how to process emotions, and instills in us the lifestyle and mentality required of a physician.

For that reason, I have undertaken the complete documentation of my medical school experience. My personal endeavor is to explore and highlight the various experiences, transformations, and hardships unique to medical students, both inside and outside the realm of academics. My hope is that incoming, current, or aspiring medical students can read my work and feel prepared for what is coming ahead, and know that they are not alone in what they are feeling and experiencing. Hopefully, my writing will spark similar reflection in my peers, heightening our personal development on this journey. There are so many things about school that I wish I had known before I started, and I hope that this can be an emotional guide for students, because choosing medicine is truly a lifestyle choice, not just a career.

Medical school is an amazing and bizarre experience; sometimes it's great and sometimes you want to quit. However, I don't know of too many other opportunities out there that will let you learn so much about yourself and the boundaries of human strength as medicine does. Nevertheless, it is important to understand what is expected of you and what sacrifices you will have to make if you decide to become a doctor. I also believe it would be a shame if you simply pass through these four years of school, never once reflecting on the way it has changed you. Even though there are mornings when I don't want to get out of bed and face the hospital, at the end of the day I am always thankful for everything that this journey has offered me.
