

Medical School Interview Tips



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*In my position as Associate Dean for Admissions in the College of Medicine at The Ohio State University, I have screened thousands of applications, presided over admissions committee meetings in which the disposition of, collectively, hundreds of student applicants have been decided, and personally interviewed many applicants to our College. One of the most frustrating experiences in this job is to watch a student with excellent credentials, who I strongly suspect will make an excellent physician, go down in flames in the interview. It is clear that some students have been coached on the interview process and others have not. It is definitely an advantage to put some serious thought and preparation into the interview, since medical schools generally only extend interviews to students who appear to have the right stuff to succeed. Translation: if you get offered an interview, **there is a chair in that school's first-year medical school class with your name on it.** Based on your performance in the interview, you will either claim it or give it away. With that in mind, here are some tips that I think will be helpful to you on your upcoming medical school interview.*

Good luck!

Medical School Interview Tips

Sit up straight (posture counts)

Slumping or letting your shoulders sag may feel comfortable, but it sends the following message: "I'm bored, disinterested and unimpressed." Obviously *not* the message you want to send. Think military here: Back straight, chin up! But you don't want to look stiff; it makes you look tense and uncomfortable. While keeping your back straight, lean forward a bit, toward the interviewer. It makes you look interested.

Make eye contact, but not too intensely.

Poor eye contact gives the appearance of dishonesty or low self esteem. It also may be construed as a lack of interest in what the other person is saying. Again, clearly not the messages you want to send when you are interviewing for acceptance into medical school. Look the interviewer in the eyes when they are speaking, and look them in the eyes when you are speaking. On the other hand, you don't want to burn a hole in the interviewer with your gaze. Don't stare; it is acceptable to avert your eyes for a second or two. Blinking is also acceptable.

The best answers are a combination of rehearsed fragments tied together by extemporaneous connectors.

There are certain questions that you can assume will be asked at any medical school interview. You will most likely be asked some version of "Why do you want to be a physician?" or "If you don't get into medical school, what will you do?" or "What do you consider your main strengths/weaknesses?" I disagree with some interviewers who seem to hold with disdain the answer that sounds canned or rehearsed. Rehearsing is fine; in fact, I recommend it. The

trick is, you want to sound conversational, not like you are reading a script. How is that achieved? More rehearsing. When I interviewed for medical school, I practiced my responses to questions that I thought I was likely to be asked. Of course, it is impossible for you to anticipate every question that may be asked, so you will have to do some ad libbing. That's OK. Be yourself, and enjoy the experience. Oh, and try not to let out a loud "Whew!" or look too excited when you are asked a question that you practiced for. Pause for a second, stroke your chin, and say "Hmmm, it seems to me..."

Look enthusiastic and happy to be there.

Being a physician is the greatest job in the world, and I truly believe that it is the second most noble profession that you can undertake, second only to being a religious leader, clergyman, minister, priest, etc. As stated earlier, if you are invited for an interview, that medical school has decided that you probably have the goods to succeed at their institution. So, be excited! You are on the cusp of something great and your dreams are within reach. Leave your interviewer with the impression that you are happy to be there and grateful for the opportunity. Even if it is your last-choice medical school, approach the interview with gratitude and humility, and imagine yourself walking those very same halls as a medical student. Because, well, you just might.

If the interviewer continues to repeat the same question despite the fact that you have answered it, he or she likes you but did not like your answer, and is giving you the opportunity to modify it.

Example:

Interviewer: "So, why do you want to be a physician?"

Candidate: "Because medicine is such a challenging field, and I have always loved challenges."

Interviewer: "OK. But what really attracted you to a career in medicine?"

Candidate: "I am very curious about how things work, and I really love science!"

Interviewer: "So why not become a research scientist? Why medicine?"

Candidate: "Medicine is dynamic, and more suited to my personality"

Interviewer: "OK, thank you for clarifying that. Now, on to something else. So...why do you want to be a physician?"

In this example, the interviewer does not like the answer and is giving the candidate a chance to give the "correct" answer. If the interviewer did not like the candidate, he or she would have simply noted the answer and moved on. So, if you have the impression that the interviewer keeps repeating the question, unless it is your life's mantra, I suggest you modify your answer.

Your "Why Do You Want to be a Doctor?" answer should include something about your desire to help your fellow man.

Most medical school admissions committees feel that the most important reason for practicing medicine is to serve mankind. So, while it is OK to mention your love of science and technology, and the fact that you love challenges, and the fact you have never really wanted to do anything else, it is a mortal sin of omission to not state your desire to help your fellow man as the main reason that you want to be a doctor. We regularly reject students with perfect GPAs and near perfect MCAT scores if we are not convinced that they have a serving heart.

It is better to take a brief pause before answering a question to gather your thoughts than to dive right in and "find the answer" in your ramblings.

Some candidates begin answering the question the instant the last word rolls off of the interviewer's tongue. Some of these same students have not clearly thought out their answers, and ramble while they are getting their thoughts together. Finally, they decide how they feel about it, and answer the question directly after many unrelated sentences. I think this is because candidates feel that an awkward silence is uncomfortable and to be avoided at all cost. But a brief pause before answering a question is perfectly acceptable, and makes you appear thoughtful. It is much better to pause for a second or two and gather your thoughts than to blurt out a stream-of-consciousness response that takes a circuitous route to the answer.

Arrogance is a mortal sin

I like confidence; I think most people do. A candidate who has put in many long hours and has learned that hard work results in success is refreshing. Medical schools want to admit students who believe in themselves and who think they can do the work. However, avoid sounding arrogant, which is how the candidate can sound if they stress their personal successes too much. Example: if you started a new pre-med club at your college, that shows exemplary leadership, and the admissions committee will see that as valuable. When describing it, it would be better to be humble, acknowledging the role that others played (“...my fellow biology majors were very helpful in this endeavor.”) rather than making it sound like you did it completely by yourself. Another example: If you are complimented on the fact that you got straight As in your honors humanities courses, don’t respond, “Piece of cake!” In particular, medical student interviewers (some medical schools have medical students serve as interviewers and members of the admissions committee) are quick to detect arrogance in a candidate, and tend to be very harsh judges when they perceive this trait. Feel good about yourself; you’ve earned the right to feel confident. Just remember, there is a thin line between a hard-earned swagger and arrogance.

The best answers to “What if You Don’t Get in to Medical School this year?” always include some variation on this theme: “I will find out why I did not, address the shortfall, and then reapply.”

Persistence can be admirable. Many medical school admissions officers look favorably upon the re-applicant who applies himself and specifically addresses his shortcomings. For this reason, when the interviewer asks what you would do if you were rejected, he is trying to ascertain how committed and passionate you are about being a physician. Even though it is wise to have a backup plan, if you answer the “What will you do if you do not get into medical school?” question with “Well, I’ve always liked kids and teaching. I would probably get my teaching certificate and become a high school science teacher,” you may be perceived as lacking a commitment to pursue a career in medicine. When there are many other candidates who will let nothing stop them from realizing their dream of becoming a doctor, you don’t want to come off as though you will happily move on to plan B if medical school doesn’t work out. Those who truly hear the high calling of medicine will find a way. This means finding out why you were not accepted, correcting this shortcoming, and applying again. This is the kind of passion that admissions officers want to hear.

Ask informed questions about the medical school at which you are interviewing.

Approach your medical school interview the same way you would prepare for an organic chemistry quiz: study for it. Prior to visiting the medical school, you should, at a minimum, be familiar with the segment describing that school in the annual AAMC Medical School Admissions Requirements publication. Additionally, you should do some online research, to find out what is new at the school – perhaps new expansions, new initiatives, etc. Asking informed questions will leave the impression that you are truly interested in attending the school, and therefore likely to come if you are accepted. Admissions officers tend to look more favorably upon students who they think will accept an offer of admission than those who they think will not.

The “ethical question” should always be answered with the following bent: “I will put the patient’s best interests first, and do whatever is best for the patient.”

Though falling out of favor, many interviewers will still ask a question or two meant to evaluate your ethical decision making. Questions in this variety include queries about how you, as a physician, would respond if you encountered a drunk surgeon prior to his performing an operation. Another favorite is the question that asks what you would do if you witnessed a medical school classmate cheating on an examination. The golden rule in medical ethics is to always put the patient’s best interests first. Thus, the “correct” answer to any ethical dilemma posed is the one that places the patient’s welfare above all else.