



# The Medical School Interview

*Taken from: Pfizer Medical School Manual -  
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## Familiar Format

The most frequent type of interaction between two individuals is an interview with one individual soliciting information and the other providing it. Regard the medical school interview as an exchange of information. Since you were young, you have been approached and have approached others to obtain information. An interview also allows people to develop a relationship and form an impression of one other. The interview is a most flexible format that can be highly individualized. It can move forward in a prearranged manner or adapt and pursue unexpected lines of inquiry. Thorough preparation allows you to take advantage of this format. Be prepared to provide accurate and comprehensive information while keeping it positive.

## Preparation for the Interview

To assure a successful interview, prepare. Think of yourself as a reporter assigned an important issue to investigate. You need a clear understanding of the organization and individuals who will be interviewing you, and the message and image you intend to convey. Review the school's catalogue and other sources of information.

- Conduct the following self-inventory before your interview:
- What is your objective?
- What is your message and how does it support your objective?
- Who is your audience?
- What do you know about this institution, its people, its curriculum and its culture?
- What do they know about you?
- Have you reviewed your own application?
- What within your application makes you uncomfortable?
- What do you hope they won't ask you and how will you answer when they do?
- Where and when is the interview?
- Have you made adequate arrangements for lodging?
- Have you allotted extra time so that you can arrive at your interview relaxed and on time?

## Interview Questions to Expect

Here are questions commonly asked during medical school interviews. Be prepared to answer each:

- What do you believe in?
- What do you care about?
- How does that caring express itself?
- How did you investigate a career in medicine?
- What made you decide to pursue a career in medicine?

- What is your favorite type of teaching style?
- What branch of medicine most interests you?
- Who knows you the best in this world?
- How would that person describe you, and what advice have they provided you?
- What teamwork experiences have you had?
- Who are your heroes?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- What skills have you developed outside the classroom?
- Where do you see yourself in 10 years?
- What is the greatest obstacle you have had to overcome?
- What issues confront medicine today? (see [www.healthpolitics.com](http://www.healthpolitics.com))
- What has been your greatest achievement?
- What person, past or present, would you most like to meet?
- What have you read recently in the press about health care?
- What makes you a better applicant than others?
- Why do you want to become a physician?
- How would you express your concern for a child needing an amputation?
- How do you relax?
- What is your biggest concern about entering medical school?
- Describe your best teacher and what made her or him unique.
- Describe an experience you had helping others.
- What was the last book you read?
- Describe an experience where you were misjudged.
- What has been your favorite non-science course and why?
- Who are your senators, congressional representatives, governor?
- What was your most difficult or demoralizing experience?
- What is the difference between sympathy and empathy?
- Is there anything you want to brag about or that you need to explain?
- If you are accepted to multiple schools, how will you make your decision?
- What is the toughest thing about being a patient?
- What type of criticism upsets you?
- Have you ever been a patient and, if so, can you reveal how that felt?
- How have your personal and volunteer experiences strengthened your goal to become a physician?
- What have been the strengths and weaknesses of your college preparation?
- Would you say you are most like your father or mother, and why?
- Why did you choose an osteopathic/allopathic school?
- What will you do next year if you don't get into medical school?
- Is this school your first choice?
- Why did you apply to this medical school?
- Is there anything I haven't asked you that you want to tell me?

The following subjects were covered in over two-thirds of the Class of 2008's medical school interviews:

- The source of your inspiration to pursue medicine
- Interpersonal qualities that will enhance your practice of medicine
- Specific qualities that lead to choice of this medical school
- Qualities that will insure your success as a medical school student and physician

The following topics are commonly raised regarding medical ethics:

- Privacy
- Children's rights
- Rights of the handicapped
- Rights of the terminally ill
- Rights of newborns with congenital conditions
- Organ donation
- Care of the mentally handicapped
- Care of the elderly
- Determination of death
- Physician's responsibility for societal health

## Physical Appearance

Physical appearance creates a first impression and impacts how you are perceived. Present yourself in a personable and professional manner. Some dress for success tips:

- Dress conservatively. Men should wear a suit or a blazer and neatly pressed pants with a dress shirt and simple tie. Women should wear a suit or solid dress.
- Women should avoid distracting or flashy jewelry.
- Jackets should be free of lapel pins.
- Remove bulky items from pockets.
- Collar and tie should be straight. Scarves should be in place.
- Avoid half-glasses or light-sensitive ones that conceal your eyes.

## Body Language

Physicians are expected to be skilled communicators whose facial expressions and hand gestures carry their message. Your body language is closely observed by a physician interviewer. The following gestures convey sincerity and interest:

- Make eye contact while you are listening.
- Sit erect but not stiff, leaning slightly forward.
- Use normal conversational hand movements to underscore your message.
- Listen intently to all questions and responses from the interviewer.

Avoid the following:

- Fidgeting or nervous gestures
- Inappropriate smiling or laughter
- Tightly grasping the arms of a chair or your hands in a prayer gesture
- Tightening and loosening your facial muscles
- Unnaturally straight, rigid posture
- Wandering eyes, particularly when you are addressed or speaking

## Interview Recommendations

There is no consistency from one interviewer to the next. Styles and approaches vary. Expect anything! Most interviews are open and non-combative. Approach the interview with optimism. Remember the following:

- Honesty is key!
- Be prepared for questions regarding weaknesses or discrepancies in your application.
- Don't list any honors, research projects, or volunteer experiences in your application that you will be unable to support as real and significant.
- Ask questions if you have real ones about the school.
- Read the school catalogue prior to the interview.
- Do not ask what your chances are.
- Do not get upset if the interviewer is late.
- Allow the interviewer to interrupt you, but don't interrupt the interviewer.
- Elaborate, don't dominate conversation.
- Know your application file better than the interviewer (excluding your letters of recommendation).
- Don't ask any questions about your letters of recommendation if you have waived rights to see them.
- Know something about the city you are visiting, even if only from that day's local newspaper or the taxi driver.
- Don't try to second-guess the interviewer.
- Avoid slang terms.
- Be courteous and considerate toward all office staff.
- If you know a student or faculty member personally, feel free to weave this naturally into the conversation, identifying her or him as a source of guidance and advice.
- If this school is your first choice, state it. If not, explain your first choice if asked, and present this school as your second, if this is accurate.
- If your choice of this school is tied to a fiancé's or spouse's choice, state it. Most schools are sympathetic to couples.

### Optimal Arrival for the Interview

A thoroughly planned arrival tips the odds in your favor. If the interview is not in your immediate area, come the day before and stay overnight in a hotel or at a friend's home. Be sure that the accommodations are adequate for a good night's sleep and grooming the following morning. If possible, preview the physical site where the interview will take place. If you have the interview room number, arrive early to familiarize yourself with the location. Seeing the site with its physical arrangement avoids any sense of surprise that might shake your confidence during the interview. Awaken that morning with plenty of extra time so that you can properly groom, eat, and arrive with time to spare. Use the bathroom prior to the interview to check your clothes and your smile in the mirror.

Review the following quick tips for success:

- Be honest
- Be professional
- Think fast, but speak slowly
- Be human and interesting
- Smile. Believe in yourself and you will transfer this belief to your interviewer.

### Relaxation Techniques

Most candidates experience appropriate anxiety as they approach their interview. Remember that confidence is earned and you only acquire it by meeting challenges in a positive, determined spirit. If nervous in the final hour, try the following:

- Walk around the block, let your muscles relax, your eyes wander and b-r-e-a-t-h-e. Whistle. Sing.
- Stretch your arms, legs, torso and facial muscles.
- Think of treasured or humorous memories. Smile or laugh.

- Breathe deeply, counting for a number of seconds, then hold your breath the equivalent number of seconds and finally exhale for as long as you can. Repeat this, lengthening the breath, the hold and the exhalation.
- If you are in a room awaiting the interviewer's arrival, practice deep breathing and alternately tense and relax your muscles, head to toe.
- Acknowledge that even seasoned professionals experience some stage fright. If controlled, this energizes and enhances your performance.
- Remember to believe in the very best within you.

## The Appearance

The interview begins when the interviewer enters the room. Rise and greet the interviewer professionally with a firm handshake and a smile. Express your pleasure and gratitude for the opportunity to interview at this medical school. While the interviewer will take the lead and ask the questions, it's important to keep in mind that you mutually own this interview. Ideally, you will enjoy an interpersonal exchange that connects and enriches you both.

Some key points:

- **Be Personal and Professional** Doctors may begin somewhat formally. Interviews often begin tensely and gradually yield to a warmer, more relaxed atmosphere. Mirror the mood of the interviewer and stay positive.
- **Stay on Message** You should have in mind two or three points that you wish to convey during the interview. Seek opportunities early to introduce and reinforce these points.
- **Practice active listening** Listen carefully to questions posed. Clarify any inquiry or information that is unclear before you respond.
- **Control the pace.** When nervous, most people speak too quickly. A controlled, slower pace shows a contemplative, more self-possessed candidate.
- **Monitor Your Body Language** Be aware that your body is a powerful communication tool.
- **Stay alert, polite, poised.** Skilled interviewers will attempt to relax you so that you will be honest and spontaneous with them. Their goal is to get to know the real you. This is your goal as well. Remember, though, that you need to maintain a polished, professional demeanor.
- **Maintain respectful, interested eye contact** Use eye contact as you would when fully engaged in an interesting conversation with a friend.
- **Affirm the positive** If asked a question that provides an opportunity to voice something you think is important, restate the question during your response. You might even reveal that you are glad the interviewer broached the subject.
- **Proceed mindfully** Stay within the bounds of a professional interview. The interviewer is not a trusted confidante or close friend. Rather, the interviewer is appraising your personal qualities and communication skills. Humor can jeopardize your candidacy. You needn't be stiff or refrain from smiling. Just save your favorite joke for a more appropriate audience.
- **Enjoy the interview and learn from it** At the end of your meeting, you will know more about the interviewer, yourself, and this prospective medical school. Your performance will be improved by an attitude that emphasizes exploration rather than fear.

## Tough Questions...

Foresee tough questions or those that come from left field. Try to provide a reasonable and informed response. It is not so much what you say, but how you say it. Some counsel:

- Acknowledge that this is a difficult question. This shows that you are listening and gives you a few moments to prepare a reasoned, balanced response.
- Demonstrate concern and thoughtfulness in your response and maintain a moderate voice.
- Above all, don't take a tough question personally. Interviewers ask difficult questions to test your resilience.

- Do not argue or become defensive. The last thing you want to do is dispute the interviewer.
- Modulate your body language. You may want to verbally retaliate, but your body should do just the opposite. This softens the impact of the trying question and demonstrates your equilibrium.
- Segue to a more favorable message. While addressing the question, relate it to a subject that contains some of the major messages you want to convey. Candidates who can turn the tables diplomatically prove their mettle and grace.
- Don't be overwhelmed. Your whole life is not on the line. If one hard question can undo you, you may not be able to withstand the rigors of this demanding profession.
- Conclude your response on an amicable, positive note.

## Post Interview Self-Evaluation

Now that you have made it through the interview, your work isn't over. Breathe, walk, eat, and then sit down within an hour of your interview and answer the following questions:

- Did I stay on message?
- Was I in control?
- Did I tell the truth and avoid exaggeration?
- Was I calm and did I pace myself well?
- Did I anticipate the questions?
- Did I present a positive, professional image?
- Did I listen carefully?
- Was I a credible candidate?
- Could I have done better and how?
- What did I learn?
- There's always something you could have done a little bit better. Through conscientious introspection, you will continually develop your interpersonal skills.

## Summary of Interview Advice

- **Be Prepared:** Have something to say. Say it with style, force and intelligence.
- **Be Human:** Medicine requires excellent communication and people skills, composure and poise. During your interview, demonstrate your maturity, thoughtfulness and sensitivity.
- **Be Yourself:** Physicians regularly practice reading people's overt and covert responses. Be yourself, trust in your preparation and in human nature and learn from your experience.

If you want to practice your interview techniques schedule a mock interview with a Pre-Health Professions Coach [online](#) or by calling 512-471-3172. We wish you the best of luck! Let us know how your interview goes.