

I am a first year medical student at the University of Ottawa and let me tell you, getting here has been quite an adventure. I was born and raised in a small town in north-western Ontario. I left home at 19 not only to pursue higher education, but to follow my dreams; I have discovered a lot about myself in the process. It's interesting to look back and observe that my career interests have diverged very little since I was 5 years old. It seems that I have always been interested in medicine.

My first piece of advice about applying to medicine is to see if you really want to work in a clinical setting. Volunteer in different areas of the hospital that interest you. If your high school offers a co-op program, sign up! During my OAC year, I had the time of my life doing radiology, surgery & lab work in my hometown hospital. So far, I have experienced more as a high school co-op student than I have in clinic. I also worked or volunteered at summer camps, at homes for the aged and with people who have special needs, to learn which populations I was best suited to work with. I recommend volunteering at a variety of places and with different populations. But volunteer because you want to help others, not because it looks good on a resume or medical school application. Both work and volunteer experiences sincerely helped me to make informed decisions about my future. To help with the medical school application process, keep a running list of your activities (volunteer, extra-curricular, sports...) and contact details. Doing this would have saved me hours of research and phone calls.

I decided to move away for university for two reasons. First, I was really craving independence and Montreal was as far away from home as I could get. Montreal was the place where I could take sciences in school & learn French outside of school. During my four years at McGill, my happiest time was also my busiest time. I enjoyed school most while I was instructing part-time as first aid and swimming instructor, because I was giving back to my community. In retrospect, I wish that I had worried less about getting high marks and more about the material I was learning in my university courses. Now that I am in medicine, this is the biggest change I see in my academic self. I am so much more focused on the learning process than on getting the marks. I still do very well in my courses but am much more relaxed while studying for exams, since I waste less energy by worrying.

My second piece of advice is to not be in a rush to get to med school. Take time to travel and to get to know yourself. Be proud of the directions your life has taken so far. I believe that things happen for a reason. I could not be happier about not getting into medical school the first time around. This not only gave me an entire year to develop other aspects of my character, but also to learn more about myself through travel. I remember waiting anxiously for the emails that would decide my life direction. I was accepted into the Canada World Youth HIV-AIDS program in May of 2005, just before I received rejection letters from medical school. I was extremely disappointed when I was rejected by all schools that I applied to and wondered if I would ever be a doctor. I vowed to reapply the next year.

In September, I met Canadian and Indian participants and we quickly became a team. Each Canadian was matched with an Indian counterpart, and each pair was placed with a host family in London Ontario. For the next three months, we kept very busy volunteering in various HIV-AIDS related organizations around the city, preparing for our educational activity days & planning a variety of cultural & social events in the community. While in London, I was hit by a car while on my bike and was left with a broken ankle. I had surgery to repair the damage, and left for India in early December with a cast still on my leg. I learned first hand the health care system in India because my cast removed there and I took two months of daily physiotherapy at the Spinal Hospital in New Delhi. If you can, experience the healthcare system in a developing country.

While my team-mates could start volunteering upon arriving in India, I had to wait almost a month before starting my volunteer placement. Although I found this frustrating at times, this was of to my benefit because it afforded me the time to learn to read & write some basic Hindi. For the next two months, I worked at a hospice for AIDS patients. To address issues of stigma and discrimination of persons living with HIV/AIDS, I developed staff training sessions and a culturally sensitive community outreach program to inform the public of HIV transmission and prevention. I also tailored these sessions to address issues of stigma and discrimination in the hospital setting and trained nurses and other hospital staff. From this experience, I have learned to work in a cross-cultural setting and have cultivated a deeper appreciation for the harm reduction philosophy. This exchange was a life-changing experience. I returned to Canada refreshed and ready for the next challenge, interviews.

Five days after my return from India, I interviewed first at U of Ottawa, then at NOSM. The interview process seemed much easier the second time around. My only advice is that when you interview, just be your wonderful, confident self. Think about why you have decided to apply to medicine - what is your driving force? Some of my colleagues read books about medical ethics to prepare, while others were given mock interviews by friends already in medical school.

Medical school is the biggest challenge I have ever faced. The biggest surprise for me was the amount of material that is covered and how much research and reading is required on a day-to-day basis. It demands self-teaching and self-discipline, so be ready for that. I find medical school very different from undergrad because the professors no longer teach you exactly what you need to know for the exam. But each medical school is different, so introduce yourself to its curriculum before deciding to apply there. With seven weeks of class to go before I finish my first year, I am still learning to find that balance between life & school, because school keeps me constantly busy. I would not change it for the world.