

My name is Kona Williams, and I am a 2nd year medical student at the University of Ottawa. I am originally from Ottawa, so it's nice to be back on familiar ground. I took some time getting to medical school – I went to college first, then decided that I wanted to do research in genetics and/or biochemistry. I applied to Dalhousie University, and after 2 years, I finished with a combined honours degree in Biochemistry and Microbiology/Immunology. Since most medical schools require at least 3 years of university, I had to do a third year (my college years didn't count!) after graduation.

Although I enjoyed scientific research, something was missing. All through school, I shadowed a few physicians at a hospital one summer, and worked in a health clinic, and spent quite a few summers working at Aboriginal Health organizations; I realized that I wanted to become a physician. I had looked at the requirements for medical school admissions before heading off to university; they seemed so impossible that I put the thought on the backburner for a while. Even so, I kept my grades up, worked hard and tried to take some classes that would potentially help me in the admissions process.

The worst part about this admissions business was the MCAT (Medical College Admissions Test). Most schools require it as part of the admissions process. This was by far the most intense exam I had ever written, and I spent an entire summer studying for it after work. The MCAT tests your skills in solving problems in biology, chemistry, physics and verbal reasoning. Looking back, I should have taken the summer off to study and relax – I was much too stressed out. The MCAT has to be taken during the summer before you apply to medical school at the latest (it is offered in April and August only), and in my case, my school applications had to be in before my scores were released, so I really had no idea if I was even competitive. Luckily, my science background helped me through, and I had no problems with the verbal component.

It takes almost a whole year to complete the admissions process to most medical schools. Most of that time is spent nervously waiting for your letters or recommendation to be received, MCAT scores to be released, invitations for interviews, and finally, acceptance/rejection letters. I applied to Queen's, Western and Ottawa – I had to limit my choices, as the application process is expensive. I received interview invites in January to all three, and my interviews were scheduled for April. This is also the typical month for final exams in university, so I had to prepare for both. This was an expensive time – I had to pay for travel, accommodation, food, even a decent suit, all out-of-pocket. Interviews can be nerve-racking, but the schools go a long way towards making prospective students feel welcome, and I found it helpful to remember that I was also evaluating the school to see whether or not it was a good fit for me. Acceptances were sent out at the end of May, and to my surprise, I was accepted to all three schools. I chose Ottawa for the curriculum, the Aboriginal student program, the hospitals and the great atmosphere of the school overall.

Medical school is a totally different experience from undergrad. Classes are packed with information, and since this is a systems-based curriculum (i.e. we learn all about the cardiovascular system in a 6-week block), there isn't a lot of time to absorb everything. We are completely immersed in one system at a time, but we need to learn all the ins and

outs, including basic anatomy and physiology, pathology and diseases, physical exam, diagnosis, management, treatment options etc. There is definitely information overload, and you can't know it all! Having good study skills, and getting into a good routine are both very important – you'll become a master at time management very quickly. There is still plenty of time to do other things, and the school actively encourages students to participate in activities outside medical school. I still have time to practice karate six days a week, catch a movie now and then, spend time with friends and family and get a good night's sleep!

One of the best parts about being a medical student is being able to let curiosity drive you. Every single experience I've had with physicians, residents, senior medical students, hospital staff and patients has opened up opportunities to ask questions and learn more than any textbook can teach. Most people you meet in the hospital are more than happy to show you something, teach you something, or tell you their story. Take advantage of this!

Tips for admissions and surviving medical school:

Do your homework – make sure you know what's required to apply and what your timelines need to be.

Talk to people – speak with your family physician about your plans, talk to your professors, link up with other students who are either applying or are medical students; they can steer you in the right direction.

Try not to be intimidated – it's a long road, but taken in steps you'll be surprised at how far you can go.

If you make a mistake – it's not the end of the world! If you do poorly on a midterm, don't immediately assume you're not cut-out for medicine. Take a close look at your study skills, and most importantly, arrange time to see your professor. Your prof will be able to tell you where you went wrong and how to improve for the final.

Work on your study skills – try to develop good habits early. Cramming the night before an exam might work in high school or undergrad, but it won't in medical school. Keep in mind you'll actually have to remember this stuff when faced with sick patients – you're not learning just to get good grades anymore.

Try it out – volunteer at the local hospital, visit nursing homes or shelters, arrange to shadow a physician for a day.

Try something new – it's very easy to spend all your time trying to learn everything medicine. Don't. Try new things that aren't related to medical school – figure out how to solve a new puzzle, try a new recipe, or learn how to play a new sport for fun. You need a break!

Take time – for your family and friends, and most importantly for yourself!

General Steps to Take:

- 1) Make a decision – are you sure you can see yourself as a practicing physician 20 years from now?
- 2) Make sure you know all the prerequisite courses needed to help you write your MCAT and for your application, check the requirements for each school
- 3) Work hard to get good grades – aim high!
- 4) Try to get some first-hand experience in the medical field, by shadowing, volunteering or even working at clinics/hospitals etc.
- 5) Get involved with something – sports, politics, tutoring, student-run interest groups, volunteering; if you're already passionate about something, keep it up
- 6) Set a date to write and get a study group going for your MCAT, look into MCAT courses if you can afford them
- 7) Write your MCAT no later than the summer before you apply
- 8) You need letters of reference - identify people who are willing to do this early
- 9) Applications can be due as soon as October, so start putting together your materials as soon as possible
- 10) If you get interview invitations, congratulate yourself! Keep up with current events, read up on the health care system, and put your thoughts and feelings about wanting to pursue medicine into words
- 11) If you get accepted, enjoy your summer – don't pick up or read any textbooks