

Applying to Medical School in the COVID-19 Era



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The already daunting process of applying to medical school has become even more stressful for premed students in this time of social distancing, tele-based meetings, and the general fear of COVID-19.¹ For many aspiring medical-school applicants, there is an increased sense of stress, as carefully charted paths to medical school become so utterly disrupted. Many of the traditional aspects of applying to medical school—Medical College Admissions Testing (MCAT); volunteering or working in hospitals; studying for long hours; and, if one is lucky enough, interviewing with medical schools—have all been greatly affected by this global pandemic. Colleges and universities around the country, for fear of becoming hot spots for COVID-19, have mandated students to vacate campuses and resume classes virtually. This poses several challenges to the potential medical-school applicant (Table). Indeed, this pandemic may stimulate changes to medical education that were long overdue.^{2,3}

One of the biggest components of applying to medical school is taking the MCAT. However, the COVID-19 pandemic forced testing to be canceled for nearly 2 months and even caused the American Association of Medical Colleges (AAMC) to administer a shortened version of the MCAT. The premed students scheduled for those canceled dates were tasked with rescheduling the exam, and this delay in testing may have caused significant tension, as many have meticulously crafted plans for when to take the test. The MCAT could potentially be administered online to temper these disruptions and to provide constant service, moving forward. This would require the test takers to be monitored through a Webcam-based system in conjunction with

possibly downloading testing software to ensure that no outside applications or resources are used. Although some may have challenges operating the technology, many may find this to be an easier alternative to driving to a test center, especially for those who live in rural areas where the closest testing center may be far away.

Along with MCAT testing, the average premed student typically volunteers or works in a hospital or laboratory in some capacity. Unfortunately, the social distancing and stay-at-home orders that had been placed caused many premed students to lose access to these opportunities. For example, most nursing homes have suspended all volunteer activities and visitation privileges in hopes of protecting their residents. Common premed jobs, such as scribe positions and medical assistants, were suspended for months, as physicians have many times transitioned to working from home remotely. Similarly, many basic science laboratories were closed for a period of months, and premed research assistants were not allowed to perform any on-site activities. Nevertheless, new online opportunities have arisen. In many states, for instance, the virtual job of contact tracing to aid in the fight against COVID-19 presented a novel opportunity for premedical students. This unfortunate pandemic has provided prospective medical school students the chance to help in a situation that is unprecedented in our generation. It is hoped that these challenges induced by the COVID-19 pandemic might also allow for applicants to experience personal growth; not everything will go according to plan, and learning how to adapt and overcome challenges is crucial, especially in the practice of medicine. Indeed, this generation of



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TABLE. Challenges of Applying to Medical School in the COVID-19 Era and Potential Solutions

Challenges	Potential solutions
Lack of in-person interviews	Virtual interviews could be an advantage for people who are not able to pay the cost of traveling and lodging
Delay in MCAT testing	Webcam-based system to monitor the test taker during timed tests
Inability to volunteer in person because of social distancing	Other volunteer opportunities have arisen through virtual means, such as contact tracing or being part of a disaster-relief team
Travel restrictions prohibiting accepted students from visiting distant medical school campuses	Tele-visits using virtual reality to explore the campus and interact with faculty and current students

applicants will be well versed in dealing with the unexpected.

Every hopeful premed student understands the importance of the medical school interview process and, as such, spends the necessary amount of time preparing. How do medical schools adapt now that in-person interviews clash with social distancing guidelines set by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)? Like many others who are now turning to the virtual world, medical school interviews may be conducted online through systems such as Zoom or Google Hangouts. This new online direction may have disadvantages, such as inability to actually read people and have more natural conversations. On the other hand, many students may find the virtual interview to provide a more comfortable setting from which to be interviewed; applicants may be more secure and less anxious while in their own homes. Overall, prospective students may find the virtual interviews to be a less intimidating process while still being engaging. As this pandemic has demonstrated, telemedicine is effective and may very well continue to play a vital role in health care for many years.² By having applicants become familiar with the tele-based technology, medical schools will be creating physicians of the future.

Many students applying to medical school face an enormous barrier: cost.⁴⁻⁷ Indeed, the perceived and actual costs of applying to

medical school dissuade many potential applicants who often fear applying to institutions far from home because of travel expenses. This worry is compounded, given the current economic climate. Families and communities across the country are facing financial uncertainty, as we are all still in doubt about the future. Minority communities, rural areas, and lower-income families have been hit especially hard economically during this time, as well as facing a disproportionate amount of morbidity and mortality caused by COVID-19. Students who would have otherwise been unable to apply to certain schools may now be able to overcome such hurdles because of the absence of travel costs. Once again, the pandemic offers an opportunity to reassess the status quo in a way that may prove beneficial, particularly to socioeconomically disadvantaged groups.² This could turn out to be the biggest silver lining of the pandemic.

There is much fear that there will be a second wave of COVID-19, as there was a resurgence with the influenza pandemic of 1918. Fears have been shared by the CDC director, as he has remarked that the country's health workers may be overwhelmed should there be a combined COVID-19 and influenza season. Unlike other disasters, no one currently alive has any experience with a pandemic. The wisdom of elders of the 1918 pandemic is lost other than in the written word. Thus, there is enormous collective social anxiety, and medical students—an anxious bunch under the best of circumstances—are under tremendous stress: a fact those involved in the selection process must acknowledge and try to mitigate. Nevertheless, medical students are also some of the most resilient young people, and this struggle with COVID-19 will only make them dream bigger, work harder, and achieve more. Ultimately, this pandemic may bring forth medical school applicants ideally primed to tackle the uncertainties of modern-day medical practice.

CONCLUSION

Despite the challenges noted, witnessing selfless health care workers on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic has

inspired premedical students and likely strengthened their resolve to apply to medical schools. This moment of heightened altruism thus offers the opportunity for medical schools to streamline the admissions process and for medical school applicants to rise to the challenge.⁸⁻¹⁰

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