

So ... You Have a Medical School Interview

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Writing monographs to help those interested in the health professions is how I support my part-time work as an adviser. I believe in the value of this component of my medical practice. As you will rightly do in your practice, I ask to be compensated for my work. I also trust in the honor system, especially among those of us who are committed to the health professions where such trust is essential

Think of this monograph as being on the shelf in a book store. If you read this material, I ask you to please send \$5.00 (more if you think it is worth it!). It can be cash or a check made out to me and sent to 66 Lilalyn Drive, Fairfield, CT 06825.

In addition, if you include your e-mail address, I will put you on a list for future monographs about the health professions, admissions and other aspects of advising.

I hope you find this interesting, maybe a bit funny, but, most importantly, helpful for your journey to your vocation. Feel free to pass it along to your friends or, if you decide to switch to law school, to your future targets. *KB*

You have that really *good* letter in your hand, the one asking you to come to a medical school for an interview. Now, it is not that really *great* letter accepting you to that medical school. But, it is the next essential step in the process. Like the Maine farmer said when asked directions, "Cain't get theah from heah." Without an interview, no acceptance.

How can you maximize your impact and get the most out of your interview while minimizing your anxiety? There is lots of advice floating around out there. Read a bunch of stuff about specific questions, interview rules, being sure not to pick your nose. But, here are my suggestions that you might not find among the standard advice:

1. Success comes to the prepared.

- You want to be a doctor = clinical scientist. Research the school before you go.
- Talk with grads from the schools, especially those who are alumni(ae) of your college
- Websites give away much of the information that was previously too hard to access efficiently. Know as much about the place as you can before you get there, then on your interview, see if there is substance behind the hype.
 - > Some schools give you the names of your interviewers before you arrive. Knowing some things about their background, especially research interests, can lead to some interesting conversation.
 - Don't be "pre-med, gunner, obnoxious" about it and go overboard, but a little knowledge can be very helpful
 - Be honest. Don't say you really have had a life-long interest in the interviewer's work on the pathophysiology of athlete's foot unless you really do.

> If you get accepted, he/she might hold you to it and you could be swabbing smelly feet in Dermatology clinic in your limited free time!

2. Scheduling an interview day.

- If possible, get there as early as possible on the day **before** your interview
- Make contact with a student in the clinical years or a faculty who is an alum from your college.
- Stay overnight with a student, again preferably an alum from your school and/or a MS2
 - > Someone already over the freshman worries, but not so far away from the application process, is ideal
- Go with that student to their early morning class on the day of your interview
 - > Have them introduce you to the teacher
 - Ask the teacher's permission to observe ("Dr. Smith, may I sit in on your class this morning? I want to get a first-hand idea about what _____ school is like.")
 - > What are they going to say, "no?"
 - > You never know, Dr. Smith may turn out to be on the admissions committee.
 - > Let them know that you might be leaving in the middle of class (inconspicuously) to go to the admissions office. They'll understand.
 - > While seeing what that teacher is like may be interesting, remember that professor is $n = 1$. How good (... or bad) the teaching is may or may not represent what the educational experience will be like from the rest of the faculty.
 - > You are there to see what the students are like. After all, schools are pretty consistent in their acceptance patterns. This bunch will fair likely be pretty much like your class. They are $n = 100+$
 - Are they nice people?
 - Do they interact well with each other before class?
 - Are they welcoming to you, a stranger?
 - Are they engaged with the class work? with the professor?
 - What percentage of the class showed up for the lecture?
 - > low attendance may not necessarily be bad; students learning on their own may be a good thing
 - > however, this may tell you some things about the culture of the school's didactics
 - Could you see yourself living elbow to elbow with such people for the next four, most stressful years of your life?
 - > At your interview, "In Dr. Smith's class, I observed _____. Is that the way things usually are here."
- Scout out where the Admissions office is ahead of time and get there about 10-15 minutes before the scheduled start of the day.
 - > Not being late is obviously important, but get there too early and you have to handle the paranoid vibes from your fellow applicants. Bad Karma!
- Go to the bathroom!

3. Only people a school wants to accept are invited to an interview. Why would they waste admissions and faculty time and money on applicants who don't have the paper credentials to matriculate to their program?

Since you have an interview, the school is telling you that they think you *could* become a doctor from their school.

The interview is for you to show them that you are one of those they should select for the really great acceptance letter rather than the other yoyos in their applicant pool.

4. From the interview, admissions wants to know two things:
 - a) Can you think and express yourself clearly and in an organized manner?
 - As a doc, you have to be able to listen well and speak well.
 - > Say you are a surgeon.
 - Patients are going to ask why you want to slice open their bellies.
 - How you listen to and answer their questions will mean whether you get to wield the knife and save their lives or not.
 - b) Do they *like* you?
 - These faculty members are thinking of spending a lot of time and effort on you.
 - Are you someone they would *like* to teach for the next four years?
 - As an Admissions Committee, do they want to be hearing from their teaching colleagues, "Why did you inflict that pain in the ___ on us?"
 - In four years, are you someone that a residency program will *like*, thus paving the way for more of their graduates?
 - It is good for patients to *like* their doctor. Are you someone that patients will *like*?
5. Notice how often the word, *like*, is used. You want the interviewers to *like* you.
 We like to talk with people who are polite, relaxed and assured.
 At you interview, you want to be polite, relaxed and assured.
 That is not being obsequious, disinterested or cocky.
 It is being yourself since you probably are a pretty likeable person.
 Otherwise you would not have been able to get those nice letters of recommendation from people that know you well.
- If in the unlikely event you really are a jerk that no one likes, advice #5 is not applicable
6. What to wear.
 Your medical school interview is the one time you do not want to show your sartorial splendor or casual fashion sense. You want the focus to be on you and the answers to your questions.
- This is the time to dress like a mortician. Sure, many interviewers will not care a twit what you are wearing, but just your luck, you'll get the old fuddy-duddy who rants at faculty meetings about medical students and residents who "don't dress like doctors." Why take the chance?
- Go out and invest in
- a dark suit,
 - a pair of comfortable, polished shoes for the long tour you are likely to take,
 - a white or blue shirt or blouse
 - a conservative tie for men
 - I know you are going to be a pediatrician, but do you want your interviewer to remember your passion for taking care of sick kids, or your Mickey Mouse tie?
- No perfume or cologne. You wouldn't want your interviewer to be sneezing or looking at you through runny eyes because of your scent. Remember, you never know the idiosyncrasies of your interviewer.
 In the same regard, good hygiene, deodorant ... 'nuff said.

For guys, get a haircut. Facial hair is okay, as long as it is well trimmed. On the day of the interview, for goodness sakes, try not to cut yourself shaving. Trust me, practicing incisions on your own face will not impress them with how much you want to be a surgeon.

Remove all but the most conservative body piercings, i.e. stud earrings for women. For guys, I suggest no earrings, no matter how tasteful and small (see two paragraphs above). No other facial jewelry. You want your interviewer to focus on the words coming out of your lips, not the studs in the lips themselves.

Now I know you are saying to yourself, “But, Keith, that’s not the real me. I wear clothes with some style, some zip. I wouldn’t be caught dead without my nose ring. If _____ school doesn’t want the real me, then I don’t want them.”

That may be a highly principled approach and reasonable if you have a 3.9, 37, the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in your CV and you worked with Mother Theresa. For most, however, admissions is a matter of inches, of small differences that separates one candidate positively or negatively from the pack. Why give them any ammunition to put you on the downside of the selection equation?

Besides, one subliminal question that attire addresses is “Are you willing to play the game?” Unless a school has a formal dress code, everyone knows that in the pre-clinical years showing up in anything pretty much above naked is acceptable. In your clinical years through residency, you’ll spend a good part of your time dressed in scrubs that could and will substitute for PJs. But, as a doctor, you are going to be asked to sacrifice lots of your personal preferences in time, effort and even attitude for your patients. Will you at least make that sacrifice for an interview day ... or is it really all about you?

6. You are being interviewed from the minute you step on campus to the minute you leave. The security guard, the janitor, the secretaries, especially the secretaries, everyone is evaluating you as a potential member of their community. I know you are usually polite and all, but here Miss Manners actually counts.
7. Well begun leads to well finished. Start the interview well and the rest is downhill.
 - When you meet your interviewer,
 - a. SMILE
 - b. Say “Hello, Dr. _____” in a warm, friendly confident voice.
 - c. Shake hands firmly
 - to paraphrase Goldilocks and the Three Bears, not so hard like a test of strength; not so soft like a wet dishrag; but, just right.
 - d. You can practice a-c.
 - Once you have mastered this beginning, everything else will be easy.
8. Feeling nervous is good.

If you are not nervous at a medical school interview, you’d better check your pulse for signs of life.

Reality check: you are talking with people who are going to decide what you could be doing for a good deal of the rest of your life!

Nervousness is part of medicine. I guarantee that as a medical student, the first time you do a spinal tap on a screaming infant, or as a resident you say “Scalpel” and somebody slaps a knife in your hand, that’s when you’ll really be very **NERVOUS**.

It is what you do with your nervousness that counts.

When they call your name and you walk down that long corridor to meet Dr. Jones, your sympathetic nervous system will be kicking in. Your heart will beat a little faster, your breathing comes a touch quicker, your pupils bit dilate a bit. Remember from Physiology class, fight or flight? This is actually terrific for you because those same neurotransmitters are focusing your mind, sharpening your senses, gearing you up. Go team! For that slot in this medical school, let's "fight, fight, fight" ... politely!

9. How to control for those negative aspects of this epinephrine surge: the runner's pant, the sweaty palms, the high, squeaky voice, the jiggle feet, the twitching hands?
 - a. Breathe.

Considered a good exercise under any circumstances, it is essential to do it correctly in this setting.

A few slow, controlled, deep breaths concentrating on the act of breathing itself can do wonders for getting things together.
 - b. Sweat

A quick wipe of the palms on an unobtrusive piece of clothing can do wonders for your handshake.
 - c. Voice

If you suddenly hear yourself sounding as if you are on the brink of puberty again,

 - 1) cough to clear your throat
 - 2) lean forward just a touch in your chair
 - 3) then, concentrate on speaking just a bit slower, more distinctly
 - d. Feet

Toes and heels on the floor at the same time can stop jiggling feet.

So can leaning forward, putting pressure from your arms onto your legs.
 - e. Hands

Fingers entwined (like in humble prayer!) when you are not using them to emphasize a point will prevent them from straying to places that should remain off limits, at least for the duration of the interview.

10. Questions to be ready for

Not all the questions an interviewer will ask are going to be the expected puffballs like "Why do you want to be a doctor?" and "Tell me about yourself?" and "Where do you see yourself in ten years?" While you should have a well thought out, succinct answer on such obvious points, there will be some tougher rows to hoe.

Now you're not going to get questions out of the blue like "Would you please describe the Henderson-Hasselbalch equation for me?" or being asked to open a window that has been nailed shut. If such should happen, it would tell you a lot about what kind of school it is.

However, **anything** on your primary or secondary application is fair game. This is especially true for any research you have done. At a minimum, you should be able to describe your study's background, setting, goals and objectives, methods, results, conclusions, and your role in the work. If you worked on a study where the Henderson-Hasselbalch was an important component of the research, then that inquiry indeed becomes open for discussion, so maybe you better bone up on it!

You can also expect some thought provoking questions on topics such as health care policy issues, ethical concerns, what would you do if ... and the like.

11. Answering questions.

Posture

This is a good time to remember what your first grade teacher said: “Sit up straight and pay attention.” I suggest two feet on the floor, leaning forward slightly when speaking, especially to make a point.

Hands

Hands are great tools to be used judiciously in your interview. Hands bring life, animation, feeling to what you are saying. I especially like answers to substantive questions that are made with three (3) points, ticked off on your fingers, first, second, third.

Hands can also be a distraction, especially if they tend to wander aimlessly, nervously. So, when not being used to some purpose, clasped in your lap with fingers interlocked is a good “ready position” for you to keep them.

Timing

For those puffball questions, I suggest you limit your answers to about 2.5 – 3 minutes. Check it out on a stopwatch. That’s a really long time. But, your answers are giving the interviewer a feel for who you are, so you want to engage them, help them see the interesting things that have gotten you to this interview for medical school and that takes some time.

Substantive questions, your research for example, should be more succinct, 60 – 90 seconds. Then you need to assess the interviewer body language. Are they right there with you, leaning forward, looking for more? Then give them more. Are they sitting back fidgeting? Time to move on? Head back, eyes closed, snoring just a bit? Better start thinking of your back-up school!

12. How to handle that tough question

When you get that tough question, the one that requires some real thought to organize a cogent answer, do just that: think.

“You know that’s a very interesting question. I’d like to take a few seconds to think about that. Would that be okay?” Even on Who Wants To Be A Millionaire, you get some time before “... final answer.”

Again, what’s an interviewer going to say, “no?”

Then take those “few seconds” and think your answer through.

What to do with a question about which you are completely stumped? You know, like the first question on your organic final.

“I don’t know the answer to that” is a fine answer.

Doctors certainly don’t know the answers to every question their patients ask right off the top of their heads. The worst thing a physician, or interviewee, can do is guess.

If the interviewer asked about the Henderson-Hasselbalch equation, to keep with that example, it is pretty likely they know it pretty well. Guess and get it wrong can lead to a downward spiral of similar questions to see how much you really don’t know. Don’t give them that opportunity.

“Just say, I don’t know.”

Now I’m going to suggest something that many would not agree with, but that I think is a good idea. When you are writing your “thank you” to your interviewer (see # 16), look up and include the answer to the question you didn’t know. You can say it in a casual way, like “You asked a question that had me a bit stumped,” but then write the succinct, perfect answer you wish you had

given at the interview. Doctors may not know the answer to every patient question, but we are expected to find the correct one and communicate it back to the person that asked.

13. What to do about the dreaded “Do you have any questions?” question

This one is easy: have five (5) substantive questions about the school ready to go before the interview.

Maybe they are from your research about the school, maybe they are from what you have observed so far your time there, maybe they are questions about special interests you have for your medical education.

Make sure the answers are not readily available to you from information sent to you, on the school’s website or from the MSAR.

Fact-based questions you should ask once and get the answer. Opinion-based questions you might want to ask of several people you meet at the school to check for consistency.

14. What to do about “Improper Questions”

Questions about your race, sexual orientation, disability, age, family, national origin, arrest record (as opposed to convictions), military service, labor union affiliations, organizations you belong to, **may** be improper questions. However, if you have included these on your application, or bring them up during the interview, in some ways these can become “fair game.”

For a review of this sensitive area, I suggest you google “medical school interviews improper questions” and look through a number of very good websites on the issue.

I particularly like JobWeb <http://www.jobweb.com/interviews.aspx?id-1343> for a discussion of the issue and the options you have to handle things should such a question arise.

Specifically for health professional school interviews, though, a comment on timing is important. First, you better be pretty darn sure the question was indeed improper. If you think it was and it **negatively impacted** your interview, you should speak to the director of admissions immediately to request another interview. This should not be left until after you leave the interview day. For sure, you’re not going to take another plane flight back to _____ school, but more importantly, you don’t want to be perceived as having stewed over a bad interview and conjured up an improper question as an excuse to get another crack at things.

Having said all this about improper questions, it is very, very, very, extremely unlikely it will happen to you. Interviewers are trained in such matters. There are federal and local laws to contend with. The last thing a school wants is a lawsuit stemming from an interview. So, 99.999% of the time, it won’t happen. But, forewarned is forearmed.

15. What to do about that “bad interview”

Along the same vein, what do you do if you have a “bad interview.” You and the interviewer just didn’t hit it off from the get-go. You said Red Sox, they said Yankees. You got you’re back up, they got defensive. Before you knew it, you could have cut the hostility in the room with a knife. What do you do?

As in #14, this won’t happen, except in the rarest of circumstances. After a lawsuit, the next to last thing a school wants is a negative review on StudentDoc.net over an interview gone wrong.

The schools have every interest in making your interview day go well. After all, you may be one of those in the entering class who'll be paying all that tuition!

If you really think you blew it, however, my suggestion is to talk things over with the director of admissions at the end of the interview day. "I'm concerned that things really didn't go well with my interview with Dr. Jones. I'm afraid we just didn't hit it off. Is there a possibility I might chat with someone else? I want you to get a true picture of what I am like."

Again, the chances of this happening to you are one in a thousand, so you better be sure you have read the situation correctly. But, if so, what have you got to lose? An interviewer that hates you is pretty much the kiss of death for your application at that school anyway. Maybe you've got to drop back and throw the Hail Mary pass and see what happens.

16.. Send "thank you" letters to **everyone** who spends any significant time with you during your interview day.

- These folks could have chosen to be on the Faculty Reimbursement Committee and had real clout. Instead, they cared enough about their school and the future of medicine to talk with you. That deserves some thanks.

This includes anyone who talked with you, like the dean, financial aid folks, and definitely your interviewers and the director of admissions..

- > The one to whom you say "thank you" may be **your** Surgery professor and the MS 4 now may be the Chief Resident when **you** are taking your Internal Medicine block.

- Do this on the plane or train ride home. What, you've got something more important to do? Definitely within 24 hours of your interview. As the Cable Guy says, "Git'er done."

- In your letter, mention what you learned from all the various sources you accessed during your time with them that have increased your interest in the school.

- Tell them what about it is about you and they that would make a good fit

- > what they have that fits you and/or
- > what you have that fits them

- I believe you can say what your level of interest is in that school.

- > If it is the case, you can tell a school that they are your top choice.

- >> Obviously, you can only tell one school this and, if they accept you, you must go there. No exceptions to this honesty rule!

17. Remember, just under half of all medical school applicants are ultimately accepted. That percentage goes way up for those who gain an interview somewhere and up even higher the more interviews you have.

Each school wants the best applicants they possibly can for their class, so if you are good (and if you weren't good, you wouldn't be having an interview), they want you just like you want them.

Hey, you never know, you could get accepted to more than one school and then you get to be the one making the choices. So, in many ways, you are interviewing them as well as they are interviewing you.

Okay, you've got some things to think about, some ways to get ready. You will be well prepared. Relax and have a good time. Get a good look around. Hopefully, you may be spending the next four years there!

Admissions is a strange process, one you will hopefully look back on with a few gray hairs, a stethoscope draped around your neck and MD sewn after your name on the long white coat you are wearing. With a shake of your head, you too will recall just how strange it was. Maybe you too can help a pre-med through the rocky shoals to becoming our colleague in the sorority and fraternity of caring for the sick.

If you like, let me know how this monograph was helpful or how it could be better. Tell me your stories about interviewing, especially if they are funny, for possible inclusion in future additions.

Most of all, good luck!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Keith Bradlyms". The signature is written in dark ink on a light background.