

Why haven't you thought about studying medicine yet?

A guide for pupils in Northern Ireland to becoming a doctor — from GCSEs to medical school





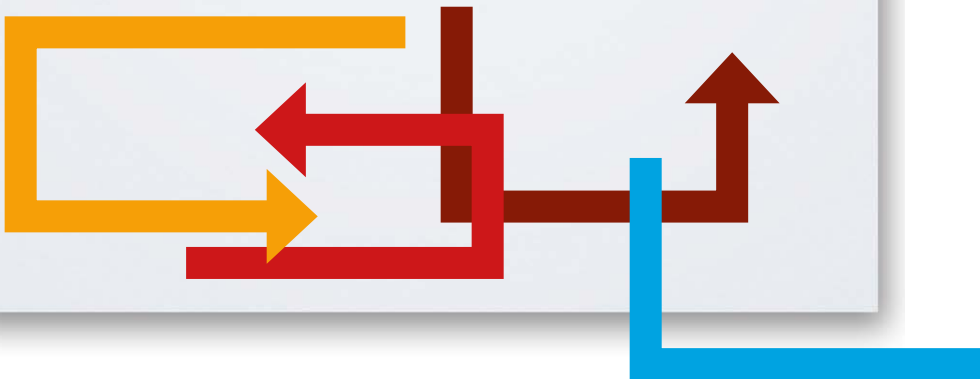
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HOW DO YOU become a doctor?

There are different routes for everyone! Just as there isn't one type of person who can be a doctor, there's not just one route into medicine. Whilst many choose to take the traditional route into medicine going straight from A levels to medical school, it can also be rewarding taking an alternative route, whether this is taking some time out before studying or completing an alternative degree.

The most obvious alternative route is via a medical science degree, but any science degree is a natural fit. With the right drive and motivation though, some arts and other non-science degree students find their way onto a medical degree. There really isn't a one route fits all approach, as you'll hear from the medical students throughout this booklet.



MY STORY – Eimear Mac Siacais, postgrad med student

I couldn't do science at A-level as my school didn't offer it, I also became pregnant and had my first child during my A-levels so I didn't get very good grades. I then went on to have two more children at 20 and 21.

At 22 I enrolled on a biomedical science access course and from there I gained entry to QUB BSc in human biology. After that I continued studying and did an MSc in clinical anatomy. After this I sat the GAMSAT and gained entry to the graduate medicine course at Ulster University.



Anyone can become a doctor, it takes a significant commitment and perseverance, but it can be done. I am a working class, mature student. I am also a mother with several long-term disabling health conditions, although I am fortunate to have family support. You will never know what you can achieve until you try. I thought the same, that someone like me could not become a doctor, but I am here now and it's going well!

My top tips would be to ensure you get yourself very comfortable with a strict revision schedule – you want it to become routine. Shadowing medical professionals isn't always feasible and not all students are granted equal access to opportunities to do so but you can still volunteer in other areas. Regardless, you should be able to demonstrate what you learned and gained from the experience and how those skills would translate to a career in medicine.

Financially it can be tough, but it also depends on your pathway of entry. From experience if applying to graduate entry consider taking a year or two to work and save before going back. This also allows you to have a break in your studies, allows you to mature a little and enjoy life for a while before making a massive commitment – it is a long journey. In the grand scheme 1-2 years is very little but is very worth it.



Study

Undergraduate medical degree, at least five years

Students learn medical sciences, along with hands on tasks and also have contact with patients during the course. Queen's University, Belfast is the only university in Northern Ireland that offers this course but you can also apply to other universities in the UK.

Graduate Entry Programme, four years

This course at Ulster University is open to those who already have a degree and wish to go into medicine.



Foundation Training, 2 years

In these two years, newly qualified doctors can gain experience in different areas to build on the skills they gained at medical school.

Specialty training, 3-8 years

After finishing their foundation training, doctors can train in an area they choose and become a specialist in this area.



Consultant

13 years minimum length of training

GP

10 years minimum length of training

SAS doctors

Training length varies due to the length and breadth of the role

Becoming a doctor is a privilege, it has been a very humbling experience being able to treat unwell patients and see them recover. There are various pathways and not everyone has the opportunity to access these.

Getting into medicine is very competitive and being able to show commitment and aptitude are key components of being successful. The idea of being a doctor is alluring however it does require having empathy and an obligation to life-long learning thus it may not be for everyone.

Following A Levels I applied to study medicine but was placed on a waiting list. I then commenced a Biomedical degree and after one year I re-applied and was accepted into medicine. My experience in the Biomedical degree may have improved my chances of success. Nowadays interviews are part of the selection process and are just as important as A Level scores, making the chances of securing a place to study medicine even more challenging.



My advice for applicants would be to secure a placement in a health care facility or try to get a summer job in a nursing home. This will allow potential candidates to develop their perspective within medicine and providing them insights into the working of Health Care Professionals as well as simultaneously developing their portfolio. This will also help in understanding patient interaction, shows commitment to the field and will go a long way in assisting in the interview process and securing a place in Medical School.

Dr Adesh Ramsewak, Consultant

WHAT'S IT LIKE being a doctor?

There's a lot more to being a doctor than you might think. When you think of a doctor, you may imagine treating patients but there are lots of roles a doctor undertakes that you may not be aware of. These include:

- diagnosing illness;
- solving problems;
- leading multi professional teams;
- practical skills – such as surgery or delivering babies;
- communicating good (and bad) news to patients and families;
- working with other health professionals;
- public health responsibilities;
- legal responsibilities;
- protection of vulnerable children and adults;
- being an advocate for patients and health services;
- being an employer;
- researching;
- teaching;
- social work; and
- counselling.



MY STORY – Dr Michael Doris, Consultant in psychiatry of intellectual disability

“A great strength of medicine as a career is that there are so many different areas your career can take, and ultimately you have agency about that career path. I chose a road less travelled from medical school. Following foundation training I first went into core psychiatry training, and later to training in psychiatry of intellectual disability, where I am currently a consultant in the community.

“I initially had an interest in respiratory medicine before having a placement in psychiatry. As time had gone on I became increasingly interested in how things like housing, where we live, the community around us impact our health, including mental health. I was particularly interested in the health inequalities for marginalised groups, which drew me to where I am now, working with individuals who have worse health outcomes than any other section of society, and trying my best to treat complex mental health issues whilst doing my best to speak up for them and their carers.

“It is also a career that is rich in multi-disciplinary team working – I get to work with lots of other health professionals, and involves trying to think outside the box and treat all of my patients as individuals and I try to really understand someone as a person just like me, rather than necessarily just prescribing medications.” Dr Michael Doris, Consultant in psychiatry of intellectual disability



Within medicine, there are lots of exciting career possibilities.

These include:

- general practice;
- hospital physician;
- hospital surgeon;
- anaesthetist;
- laboratory-based speciality;
- forensics;
- psychiatry;
- community-based specialist;
- sports medicine;
- teaching;
- research;
- politics; and
- union/committee role.

Medical MYTHBUSTERS!

So before we get into the nitty gritty of how to become a doctor, we need to clear a few things up! You may have already heard people saying things along the lines of:

'You have to be rich to study medicine' or 'it's only for the A students.'*
Let's clear up the confusion!

The myth: You have to be loaded to study medicine.

The truth: Whilst it does cost more to study medicine (mainly because the course is longer than most), there are organisations out there, such as the Student Loans Company, who can help you figure it all out. Take a look at page **24**, where we chat about the money side of studying medicine.

The myth: Only A* students go on to be doctors.

The truth: This just isn't true! There are so many routes into medicine these days. Medical schools look for lots more than just high grades. They want students who are dedicated and can relate to their patients. There are so many different areas of medicine you can go into, all requiring different skills.

The myth: You must have loads of work experience in hospitals or doctors' surgeries.

The truth: There are many ways to show interest in medicine – including local work experience schemes that your schools may know about. Some people actually have more experience through personal circumstances – by helping a relative or close friend or through illness or disability, but volunteering in the health, social care or voluntary sector is equally valuable in showing commitment, determination, 'staying power' and an ability to do things outside of schoolwork.

M Y T H B U S T E R S

“It’s a myth that you need to go straight after secondary school to study medicine, and that you have to get in the first time around or you’re not good enough. If you’re not 100% sure it’s what you want to do yet, that’s perfectly fine. Most adults chop and change what they want to do more than you realize. It’s about trying different things until you figure out what you’re most fulfilled and happy doing, so try something else first if you really want to. Just keep in mind you may need to save up a bit before starting back as a post-grad depending on how far away you live from your chosen medical school.”

*Heather Broadley,
1st year graduate
medical student, UU*

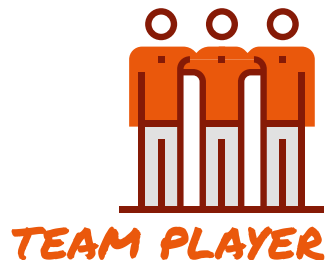


APPLYING TO medical school

Medical school places are very sought after and the application process is competitive. It's not just about grades but showing that you are an interesting individual who offers something to the medical school and the profession in the future. In particular, you will need to demonstrate that you have the foundations of the skills required to be a good doctor.

Some medical schools also have their own entrance exams. These can be academic or verbal and non-verbal reasoning tests. You need to check with your universities of choice or look at the website 'medschool' online at www.medschoolsonline.co.uk

SKILLS REQUIRED of a good doctor:



TEN TIPS for applying to medical school

1. Plan – think about what you need to do to be an attractive applicant.
2. Target work experience – lots of people try to get into nursing homes but it's important to stand out from the crowd. Perhaps you've worked in a café managing difficult customers? Think outside of the box.
3. Get involved – sports, voluntary work, clubs and projects at school or in your local community.
4. Look at different courses – not all medical courses are the same. Some have no patient contact for the first two to three years (traditional course), whilst others include early contact (integrated course). Some universities offer an integrated Bachelor of Science degree.
5. Take advice from others who have been to medical school or look at online forums and student satisfaction surveys. You can also talk to someone from your school or ask a teacher to contact local hospitals.
6. Think about where you might like to live. You may want to be close to or far from home. Some universities have a campus on the outside of a town, others are central. There may be financial considerations – cost of rent, transport etc.
7. Have an insurance choice as your 5th option, e.g. Bachelor of Medical Sciences, or a science degree.
8. Consider taster courses, such as medsix or medism. Most universities run taster courses for medicine, so have a look online.
9. Attend open days – get a feel for the university and the type of students that go there.
10. Look at requirements and work towards them.

Do your research and apply strategically! Research lots of medical schools and read their admissions policies online. I performed slightly lower in my UCAT, so I applied for universities that were more personal statement and GCSE focused. Don't be caught out by applying to your favourite university that you don't even meet the criteria for! And remember criteria can change year on year so make sure you are looking at the most recent criteria.



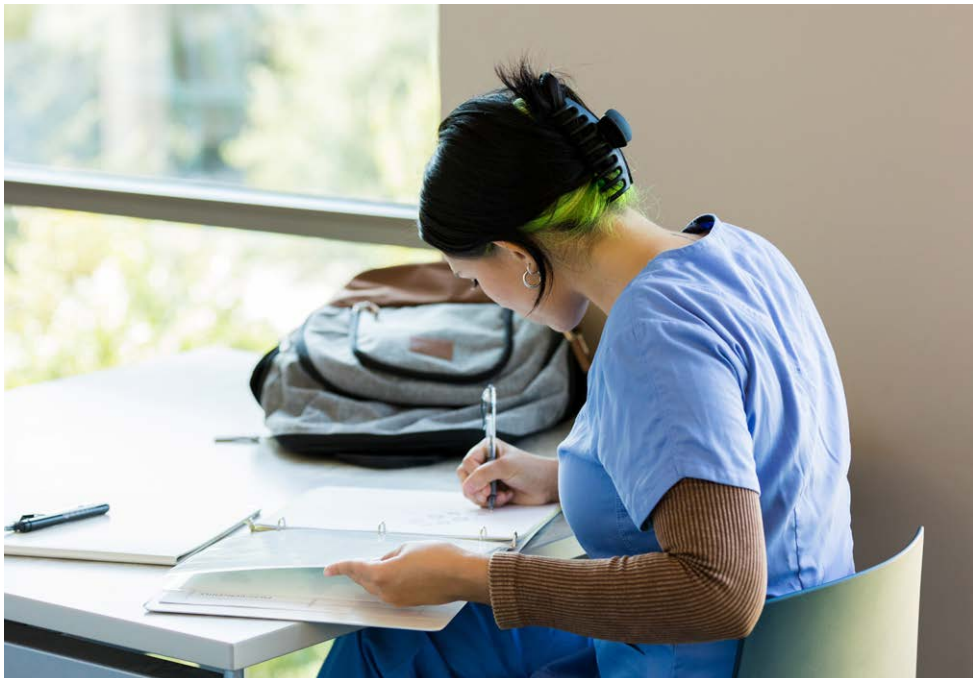
Dr Megan O'Doherty, Foundation Year 1

The **PERSONAL STATEMENT**

This is an important part of the UCAS form and needs special attention. Its purpose is to sell yourself to the universities. It needs planning and will probably involve lots of re-writing!

Key points to consider:

- Why have you chosen medicine?
- What do you offer them and what do they offer you?



TEN TIPS for writing your personal statement

1. Look at your strengths and play to them.
2. Be selective on your application form and get it proof-read by someone who will be critical but helpful (not your parents!)
3. Structure your personal statement. A strong opening and closing statement can make a big difference. You're more likely to be remembered if these have an impact.
4. Stick to the word limit.
5. Why medicine?
6. What do these universities have to offer me?
7. What do I offer them?
8. Make lists.
9. You need to demonstrate your skills – be clear about what you learned, not just what you did.
10. Don't forget the little things you do and what they say about you. For example, a part-time job, babysitting, cutting neighbours' lawns, showing that you care and can do more than just study. Sticking to and developing something over time counts more in general than one off events.

And finally, let your passion for becoming a doctor shine through. Only the passionate will succeed.

A pivotal moment for me was when I asked my Nutrition and Food Science teacher to proof-read my personal statement. After attending an expensive prep course on applying for medicine, I was trying to make my personal statement sound like the ones I had read that day and was trying to tick the stereotype boxes in a very robotic way.

My reasons for studying medicine sounded quite bland and not actually true to me. My teacher sat me down, and before even showing me her annotations she quizzed me, asking me why I really wanted to do medicine, why I have certain attributes and certain passions. I was a bit confused as to why she was asking all this, and started replying with very generic answers, but as she pushed a bit more I recognised that it was to do with growing up with a younger sister who has Downs' Syndrome (my teacher knew this) and it opened up a personal conversation. She said 'that's it – that's you – these sentences aren't you'. She knew I was trying to write the perfect personal statement instead of recognising the strengths and personal qualities that I could bring to medicine – that would be a benefit to the profession. That was absolutely the turning point for me, my confidence just sky rocketed and I carried that with me into my interviews.



The **INTERVIEW**

So you've decided you want to become a doctor and you've been asked to attend an interview at a medical school you have applied to...

Don't panic! 'Interview' can be a scary word but if you've ever had a part time job, it's likely you've experienced this in some shape or form already. If you've not done an interview there are lots of resources to help you prepare.

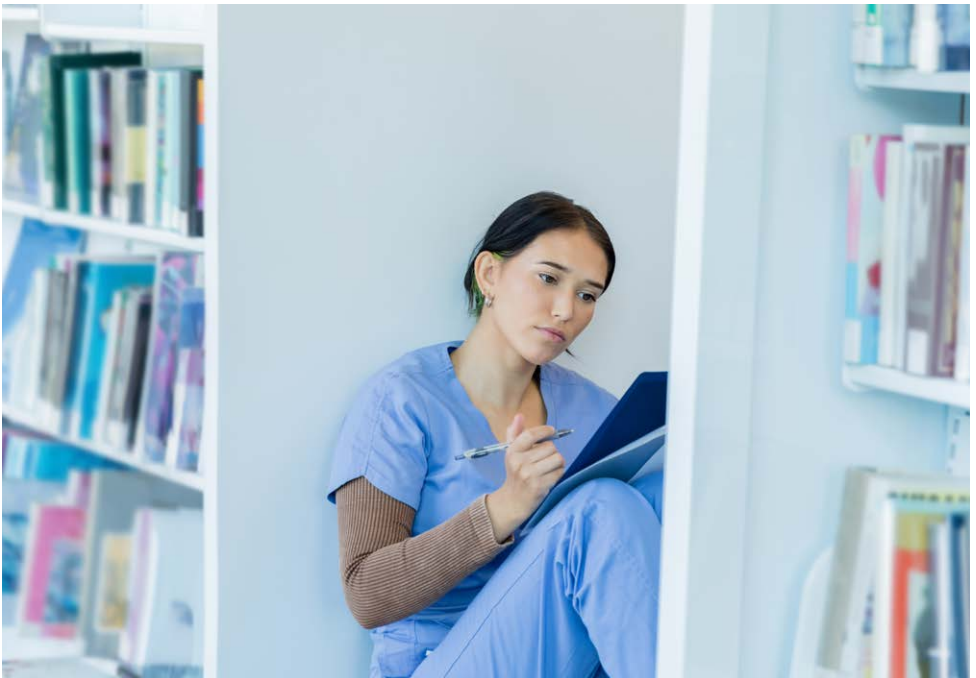
Most, but not all, medical schools interview prospective candidates. Approximately 10% of all applicants are interviewed, with one in two, or perhaps three, then being offered a conditional place. Therefore, getting an interview offers a great opportunity to get a place! Interviews vary between medical schools, but many are panel interviews; usually a mix of academics (doctors who teach medicine), clinicians (working doctors), patient and student reps.



What are they **LOOKING FOR?**

Interviews are a university's opportunity to see how you perform under pressure and whether you display the skills required to succeed at medical school, and ultimately practice as a doctor. These could include communication skills, honesty, empathy, problem solving, reasoning and listening skills. They are also an opportunity for the panel to gauge your knowledge about medicine as a career, your knowledge of topical issues to do with medicine as a career and what motivates you to want to become a doctor in the first place.

Finally, an interview is also a chance to ask about what you might bring to university life, your hobbies and interests. As with an exam, an interview needs to be prepared for and all possible questions considered.



QUESTIONS to consider

- Who are you and what you are doing now? (Don't assume they have your UCAS form in front of them. Sometimes they don't. Assume they know nothing but your name).
- Why do you want to be a doctor/how did you come to your decision to be a doctor?
- What have you done to find out if medicine is the right career for you?
- What did you learn during your work experience?
- What aspects of the course/university particularly appeal to you?
- Do you have a realistic understanding of what a career in medicine involves?
- What are your other interests/are you an active participant in school/university life?
- Do you have good communication/interpersonal skills and enjoy working with people?
- Can you demonstrate an active interest in health and medical news stories and talk about what you have read/heard/seen recently?

“Be yourself- interviewers want to see the real you!” Milan Kapoor, 3rd year medical student

You may also be asked about when things haven't gone so well, so think about and be prepared to answer these types of questions too. These can include:

- Can you give an example of a time when you performed a task poorly?
- Give an example of poor healthcare you have observed and why you felt it was poor.
- What would your friends and family say are your biggest weaknesses and do you agree with them?



What are **MULTIPLE MINI INTERVIEWS?**

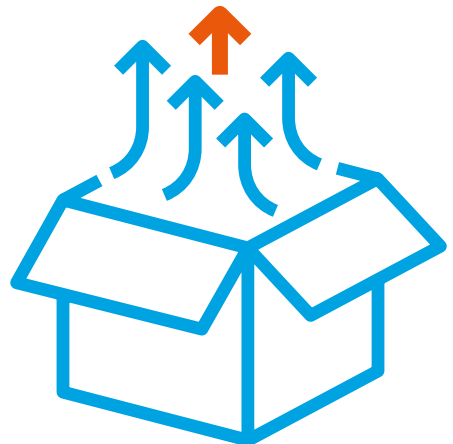
Often referred to as MMI, this is a technique some medical schools use to interview candidates. Generally applicants attend a 10-station multiple mini interview, where applicants move round the interview stations with each one lasting about 5 minutes. The interviews focus on exploring the personal qualities and attributes important in developing good doctors in the future.

MMIs are to showcase to different people why you want to be a doctor and to show the non-academic skills you have to become one. They will cover subjects like breaking bad news, explaining an object to someone who can't see it/ knows what it is, medical ethics, why you've picked that university, why you want to study medicine and what you did during your work experience. My top tip is if one station doesn't go well, don't worry, move on! Each one is a chance to have a fresh start!" Milan Kapoor, 3rd year medical student

What's the **UKCAT?**

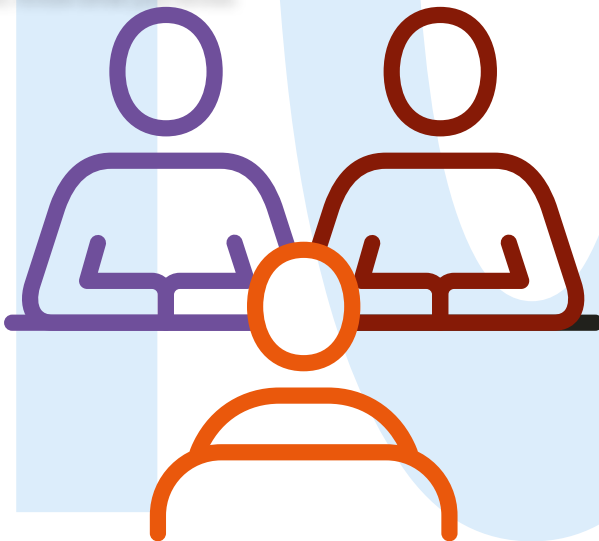
It's an admissions test that's used by some universities for their medical programmes. It's a computer-based test that helps universities to choose applicants with the most appropriate mental abilities, attitudes and professional behaviours required for new doctors to be successful in their clinical careers.

You'll be able to see example questions and tips on the UKCAT Facebook or Twitter pages.



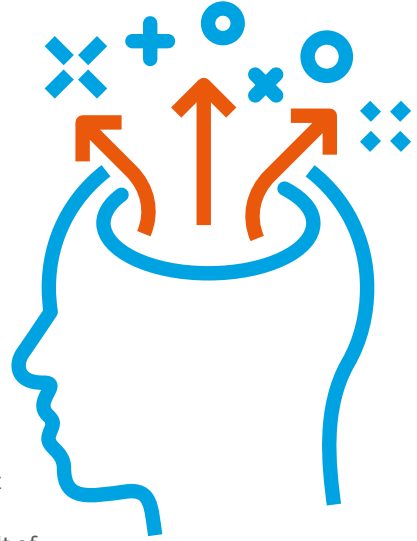
TOP TEN interview tips

1. Prepare! Think about possible questions, read about topical medical stories, and talk to other people who have had interviews or look at internet forums.
2. Read about the course and university. Have an idea what they might be looking for.
3. Do not learn answers parrot fashion. You need to sound natural and sincere.
4. Dress appropriately. Look smart and professional.
5. Do not be late. This isn't a good first impression to make.
6. Arrange a mock interview. Panel members don't need to be doctors but people who have experience of interviews and employing people, i.e. a teacher.
7. Ask a few questions at the end. Show an interest in the university/course.
8. Think about body language. Appear interested and engaged.
9. Think before you speak. It's better to take time to answer than waffle.
10. Be honest. Know what you wrote.



OTHER QUESTIONS to think about

- Why do you want to be a doctor? Why not a dentist, nurse, pharmacist or physiotherapist?
- What part do you think information technology plays in the daily life of a doctor?
- How do you react to stressful situations? Can you give an example?
- What are the main ethical questions facing the modern medical profession?
- Do you think teamwork is important in medicine?
- How is the work of a GP likely to change in the next decade?
- Have your opinions of medicine changed as a result of your work experience?
- Which of your A-Level subjects is most useful for studying a medical degree?
- What attributes do you possess which make you suited to a career in medicine?



"I didn't get an offer to study medicine when I was in sixth year. Admittedly I was despondent and was somewhat confused as to what the next step should be. I decided to enrol in a three year biomedical science degree and apply as a postgraduate. This additional education, opportunity for research, as well as an improved understanding of what study techniques suit me undoubtedly helped me during my medical degree.

Whilst it was a long eight years at uni, I wouldn't change my journey. I feel it shaped the kind of doctor I am today and made me resolute in my decision to pursue medicine."
Dr Rebecca McKillen

Top tips IF YOU DON'T GET ACCEPTED:

- Before applying, look at courses at universities that allow inter-degree transfers and always apply to one of these as an insurance choice.
- Ask each medical school you applied to for the 'rejection code' which applied to your application. This should tell you what area you need to improve.

FINANCES – is it expensive to become a doctor?

Money should not be a barrier to becoming a doctor, but you do need to be aware of what it will cost, both in terms of university fees as well as costs for living away from home if you choose to do that, books and equipment. However there are a range of grants and loans available to students.

If you go straight to Queen's University Belfast (or another university in the rest of the UK) to study medicine after leaving school, you will be able to apply for:

- Student loan for tuition fees: this is not means-tested and can cover the full annual tuition fee of £4,710 for 2023-24 academic year.
- Student loan for maintenance/living costs: means-tested; up to £6,780 can be awarded; allocated based on whether you are still living with parents/ guardians or away from home; paid out in three instalments throughout academic year. Maintenance loans have to be repaid and interest is charged on any amount borrowed from the date the first payment is made to you.
- Maintenance grant and special support grant: means-tested and non-repayable; up to £3,475 is awarded. These grants can be applied for alongside any other available finance, including a maintenance loan, as part of the student finance application each year. If a student is eligible for a special support grant they cannot get a maintenance grant too.
- QUB bursary: paid directly to an eligible student's bank account in one instalment, normally in mid-February on the basis of a student's verified household income. Approximately £440 will be awarded.
- DoH NI bursary: The Department of Health in Northern Ireland (DoH NI) will give you a bursary in your fifth and later years of study, regardless of where you study in the UK. The bursaries are income assessed and the amount paid depends on the level of household income. www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/healthprofessional-courses. During the period for which the bursary is payable, DoH will pay your tuition fee contribution in full (£4,410 for 2023-24). However, please note that your maintenance loan will be reduced for the balance of your maintenance support.

If you decide not to go straight to study medicine, but instead do another degree first, you will be able to apply for:

- Maintenance loan: non-means tested if under 25 years of age, approximately £4,000 per year awarded.
- Supplementary grants: this can include disabled students' allowance, childcare grant, adult dependants' grant, parents' learning allowance, travel grant.

There is a lot more information on the funding support available at www.studentfinanceneni.co.uk

Before you begin, take the time to research and develop an awareness of the cost of studying medicine – the fees, accommodation costs, travel; as well as the hidden costs like books or equipment. This will make sure there aren't any surprises later down the line and help you set saving goals for the years ahead!

- Always check if you can use student discount on any purchases you make
- Definitely sign up to become a BMA member to receive discount on your stethoscope (which can be very expensive purchase!)
- Try to save money where you can so that you can afford the expenses involved in medicine
- Buy second-hand textbooks from senior medical students or via social media
- Make use of free online resources including the BMA online resources
- Make your own coffee and meals
- Bring a packed lunch if you can
- Walk or use public transport to travel to uni/placement
- Take the time to apply for any scholarships or extra funding that you might be eligible for, don't be put off by lengthy application forms!
- A part-time summer job can help you build up money for the year ahead.
- Listen to BMJ Sharp Scratch podcast episodes on managing your money as a medical student.

*BMA Northern Ireland produces a finance guide every year so make sure to read it to help plan your finances!
Victoria Paice, 5th year medical student*

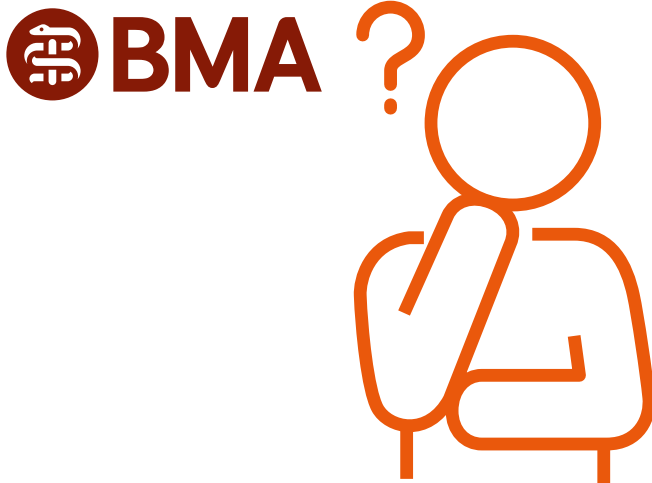
SO THAT'S IT. THE LOW DOWN ON HOW TO BECOME A DOCTOR.

WHY YOU SHOULD join the **BMA** when you become a medical student!

We've tried to be as honest as possible about the process, so if and when the time comes for you to apply to medical school there won't be any surprises! We've offered our expertise, and if you haven't already done a quick internet search, you may be asking yourself, 'so, who exactly are the BMA?'

We're BMA Northern Ireland, the British Medical Association's Northern Irish arm, and we're the trade union for doctors. That means we speak for doctors and represent them. Here's a bit more info...

An association both friendly and scientific to promote the medical and allied sciences and to maintain the honour and interests of the medical profession.



The BMA is...

- a voluntary professional association of doctors
- speaking for doctors at home and abroad, and
- providing services for its members
- an independent trade union
- a scientific and educational body
- a publisher
- limited company funded largely by its members.

It does not...

- register doctors: that is the responsibility of the General Medical Council (GMC)
- discipline doctors: that is the area of the employer/health board or the GMC



CHECK US OUT – links to website and social media

Useful websites

We hope this booklet has shown you that it doesn't matter what background you're from, as long as you work hard and have the drive to succeed, you can go into a career in medicine.

Whether you're about to choose your subjects for GCSE or A-Level or if you've just got around to considering your future prospects, it's an exciting time in your life and there's lots of useful information out there to help you make your decision. You may find these websites interesting...

- www.thestudentroom.co.uk
- www.medschools.ac.uk
- www.medicalcareers.nhs.uk
- www.ucas.com
- www.medschoolsonline.co.uk
- www.bma.org.uk

BMA

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