So you want to be a medical student?

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Being a medical student is necessary to undertake the essential examinations to become a doctor, but also provides an insight into medicine as a career and the social life it brings with it. The exams may be tougher and more frequent than for many other degrees; however, the number of social events and activities are just as numerous.

Medicine has always been a degree with a close-knit community spirit within each year group and even between the different years. This is likely a result of the long hours spent in class together. Medical students are renowned for working hard and playing even harder. Many universities have societies run by groups of medical students to organise social events throughout the year, like three-legged pub crawls, mystery tours and formals. Many medical schools also participate in inter-schools sports challenges and charities that organise a wide range of events, like fashion shows and health clinics. Within each university there is also an even bigger number of non-medical activities and organisations which are available to widen your social circle even further.

When choosing which university to study it is important to know that there are three main types of courses. The first type, referred to as a traditional course, is purely taught by formal lectures for the first number of years and has separate clinical years, sometimes even at different universities. The second type, an ‘integrated systems’ based course, still has a significant number of lectures and small group teaching but from the first year has hospital-based clinical attachments. The final type, ‘problem based learning’, (PBL) uses clinical scenarios to stimulate personal learning and therefore requires a very motivated student.

In recent years the apprenticeship nature of the medical student has become less common, and this is the result of increased student numbers and a change in the organisation of health service provision. Although lectures and tutorials provide a more standardised level of teaching, clinical attachments provide a mentorship aspect, where positive experiences can inspire career aspirations. No matter which type of course you choose you have a minimum of two sets of exams a year and sometimes even as many as four.

Becoming a doctor does come with responsibilities, and a full list of these essential requirements are published in the General Medical Council’s document called ‘Tomorrow’s Doctors’ (http://www.gmc-uk.org). The safety of patients is paramount and all medical students will be expected to be able to communicate, work in a team, display a caring, honest and trustworthy attitude when interacting with patients and their relatives. It is crucial to remember that even as a medical student you are privileged with confidential patient information and so you should act appropriately to merit their trust.

The down side to being a medical student is the academically challenging nature of the course, a long hard slog requiring perseverance and unfortunately shorter holidays than most other degrees. However, overall the practical hands-on nature of the course, extensive variety of topics, and start of a career with endless opportunities with a social life that will help support you through the hard and fun times, all make being a medical student a fun few years of life that all of us look back on fondly.

Further information can be found on individual university websites.