Preparing for your MCAT? Persistence, patience can pay off

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The Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) is a key component to getting into a medical school. Each year, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), more than 85,000 students take the exam.

If you are planning to be among the students who will sit for the MCAT in the coming year, it may be weighing on you. Andy Chen, now a third-year medical student at Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine, is a veteran of the exam. Chen took the MCAT more than once to help land in medical school. Here are four tips he offers to prospective medical students who are preparing for the exam.

**Practice makes perfect**

There is a vast amount of MCAT prep material available, but nothing is closer to the real thing than the practice exams offered online—a quick web search reveals several companies offer them for free.

Practice exams are “a great way to self-assess one’s readiness to sit for the real exam,” Chen said. “I always felt a little nervous when I took the MCAT, so I felt that doing as many practice exams as I could to simulate the real test day helped in calming my nerves a bit.”

“I also found it helpful to do practice test questions in addition to doing content review. Not only did practice questions help with test-taking strategy, I felt that doing questions was a great way to learn content via reading answer explanations to questions I answered incorrectly.

“Content review through reading textbooks, attending lectures, or watching online videos was helpful, and doing practice questions helped solidify the knowledge I acquired through those channels,” Chen added.
Timing is everything

The MCAT is offered about 30 times a year with test dates ranging from January to September. Chen said there’s no need to rush your preparations to make a certain test date.

“Really take your time and wait until you are fully ready to sit for the exam,” Chen said. “Readiness can be assessed by a self-reflection of one’s mastery of the content knowledge and performance on practice questions and exams.

“I found it really challenging to study for the MCAT while performing other responsibilities such as coursework or employment. I would recommend that students try and spend a couple of months committed to just MCAT studying, if at all possible, to really maximize their study time and preparation for the MCAT without distractions.”

Stay the course

The MCAT is a seven-and-a-half-hour marathon that likely differs from any test a prospective medical student has ever taken. And MCAT prep courses, considering those factors, can help you get a lay of the land from an expert.

MCAT prep courses “were truly instrumental in helping me get into medical school,” Chen said. “I really appreciated the structure and organization of an MCAT course, which included content review lecture days on certain weeknights which allowed for free time during other days to review content on my own and do practice problems.”

One score doesn’t determine your future

According to the AAMC, you can take the MCAT up to three times in a single testing year, four times during a two consecutive-year period and seven times in a lifetime. Chen believes that part of the reason he was able to ultimately earn medical school admission is that he kept his head up and did not give up.

“The MCAT score is only one component of a candidate's entire application,” he said. “There are hurdles in the journey to becoming a doctor, and the perseverance and tenacity an applicant demonstrates in overcoming a disappointing MCAT experience—or any other shortcoming in their application for that matter—will go a long way in earning an acceptance to medical school.”