Medical school isn’t cheap.

The median tuition was $38,119 at a public medical school, for a student paying in-state tuition, fees and health insurance during the 2018–2019 academic year. And that number, which comes from the Association of American Medical Colleges, is on the low end. The median cost for tuition, fees, and health insurance for students at private schools in that time span was more than $60,000.

So it’s fair to say the biggest question a prospective medical student may be pondering is: How do I pay for this?

Student loans are likely to be the answer for most. That having been said, you can secure some funding on the front end via medical school scholarships, a viable option for those who qualify and are willing to do the leg work.

“There are more opportunities out there to get scholarships than people realize,” said Mark Henderson, MD, associate dean for admissions and outreach at the University of California, Davis School of Medicine (UC Davis). “Of course, like many things in life, it takes sort of a rattling of cages and being scrappy about it.”

What types of scholarships are available and how can you go about finding these opportunities? Here’s what a few experts in the field had to say.

Institutional scholarships

The availability of financial assistance a medical school provides students will vary significantly. It can be based on merit, need or other mission-driven attributes an applicant possesses.
At UC Davis—one of the 37 medical schools in the AMA Accelerating Change in Medical Education consortium—the majority of admitted students are offered a four-year financial aid award or scholarship at the time of acceptance based on information from their application. Upon matriculation, students are then eligible to apply for a number of criteria-specific scholarships from UC Davis’ endowment funds. Some of these funds are awarded based on geographical origin or financial need; others are based on career interest (e.g. primary care) and other criteria.

Service scholarships

Service-based scholarships funded by the federal government offer students a chance to fund virtually their entire education in exchange for a commitment to serve a certain population. Among the more popular options is the National Health Service Corps Program, which requires a year of work as a primary care doctor in an underserved region for every year of scholarship funding, with a minimum of two years of service. The military-sponsored Health Professions Scholarship Program provides a full scholarship to medical school in exchange for an obligation to serve as a military physician.

“Several of my faculty colleagues went to school on those scholarships because they pay for essentially your tuition fees, books and most of your living expenses while in medical school,” Dr. Henderson said. “It’s a really good deal. Now you owe them, of course, several years of public service. But for someone who has financial need, I think it can be a great way to make it possible to attend medical school.”

Outside scholarships

When students interview at UC Davis, they are given a written list of available outside scholarship opportunities. It is 32 pages long and is still is only the tip of the iceberg.

“In terms of…donors and agencies that sponsor students, many of these resources spring from local community goodwill,” he said.

Dr. Henderson recommends checking with community organizations such as county medical societies, and Rotary, Lions or Soroptimist clubs to see what type of scholarship opportunities are available.

The bottom line
Whether or not you're able to turn up significant scholarship money, admissions and financial aid officers stress that tuition costs shouldn't deter someone with a passion for the field from pursuing a career in medicine.

Even if you borrow a significant amount for medical school, between loan-repayment options and earning potential, you should be able to pay the educational debt back in due time.

Lauren Snow is the financial aid director at the UC Davis Health Financial Aid Office Schools of Medicine & Nursing.

“While average medical school debt is significant, we would never want potential students to be scared about the cost of their education, because there are many avenues to repay such debt,” she said. “One of the most rewarding things that happens in my job is when one of our graduates comes back and says, ‘Lauren, you're going to be so proud of me: I paid off my debt!’ and they haven't even been out medical school for 10 years yet.”