

How COVID-19 is affecting medical school admissions

APR 9, 2020

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In a time of year when most medical schools are finalizing their classes and students are making choices on where they will begin their medical careers, the COVID-19 global pandemic has added a curveball to the admissions process.

For the 2020 application cycle, schools with rolling admissions have filled most of their spots. From the student vantage point, the American Medical College Application Service sets a deadline for students to narrow their acceptances down to a single medical school by the end of April.

Yet the COVID-19 pandemic's limiting of physical contact has changed the final recruitment weeks for both students and institutions weighing options. For instance, second-look days—a chance for admitted students to visit schools in the spring and compare their finalists—have largely been moved online.

“A Second Look Day is primarily a celebration to get the students very excited for medical school,” said Benjamin R. Chan, MD, associate dean for admissions at the University of Utah School of Medicine, one of 37 member schools of the AMA's Accelerating Change in Medical Education Consortium. “For a significant number of students who have multiple offers, it's a chance to shop around. Those being canceled nationwide forced us to adopt a virtual second-look day. I don't know that it can fully replace what a live event looks like.”

In terms of making that final decision, Dr. Chan said students shouldn't change their mind about a medical school based on the pandemic.

“At times of crisis, it makes sense to go with your gut instinct. If you originally liked a med school [before the pandemic], it's still going to be the same medical school, even if we are all going to be a little different after this,” Dr. Chan said. “Don't make decisions strictly based on the crisis. The same instincts of the decision being a combination of programming strengths, connection to the local community, finances, where you see yourself, those still stand.”

Distance interviews

Medical schools that are still extending offers to new candidates continue to conduct interviews with 2020 applicants.

John D. Schriener, PhD, is associate dean for admissions and student affairs at Ohio University Heritage College of Osteopathic Medicine (OU), also a member of the AMA consortium. OU plans to complete interviewing prospective students in the coming weeks. To do that, the school has moved interviews online, conducting them in part on Zoom and in part on GoToMeeting.

“We have still been able to get what we want out of the process [while conducting interviews online],” Schriener said. “I don’t feel like we’re compromised, but it was just a bit different. This is kind of the new reality for everyone, and we have just established our new process.”

For prospective students who are readying for remote interviews, Schriener advised to treat the experience like any other interview.

“Prepare as if it were in person, which means dress for success,” he said. “If you can find a comfortable space that is going to be quiet, go to it. Make sure that you minimize any distractions that could take away from the focus of your interview. You still want to maintain virtual eye contact and good posture and continue to make sure that you’re a really active listener.”

Future classes face uncertainty

For those planning on applying as part of the 2021 application cycle, the spring prior to applying to medical school is a common time to take the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT), one of the primary criteria used to evaluate prospective applicants.

According to an FAQ prepared by the Association of American Medical Colleges, administrations of the exam have been canceled globally through May 21. For those who had already registered for the test, all rescheduling fees will be automatically waived.

Applications are typically submitted in the early fall of the year prior to admissions. MCAT scores are part of that, and many schools require applicants to have taken the exam before October of their application year. The AAMC is working with the schools as they begin to prepare for later test score availability for the upcoming application cycle.

Other areas of a medical school applications that could be affected by the pandemic include students’ ability to work as volunteers or shadow physicians, which are limited by mandates on social

distancing and a shortage of personal protective equipment. There also will likely be some leeway given on how medical schools view transcripts. Most medical schools do not accept undergrad pass-fail credits, but with undergraduate schools going to remote learning, that has become a common practice.

“Everyone is in the same boat,” Dr. Chan said. “This pandemic is an international crisis. We are all going to through it together. So future students, your application is going to be impacted like everyone else’s. No one can go out and do any of those premed activities right now. That might be the case for the next few months or longer, so it doesn’t make sense for people to feel like they are at some sort of competitive disadvantage.”

Medicine can be a career that is both challenging and highly rewarding, but figuring out a medical school’s prerequisites and navigating the application process can be a challenge into itself. The AMA premed glossary guide has the answers to frequently asked questions about medical school, the application process, the MCAT and more.

Have peace of mind and get everything you need to start med school off strong with the AMA.