Premeds: Capitalize on gap years before applying to medical school

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For most students, the route to a career as a physician is an indirect one, in that they take time between completing their undergraduate studies and applying to medical school.

According to a 2019 survey of incoming medical students conducted by the Association of American Medical Colleges, 43.9% students who enrolled in medical school took one to two gap years. Of the students surveyed, 13.4% also took three to four gap years and 7.9% took five or more gap years. If you are taking time off between undergrad and applying to medical school—or if you are considering that option after undergrad—how can you make the most of it?

Weigh the current situation

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown a wrench into many best-laid plans. For some undergrads, the pandemic has cost them the chance to build up their medical school credentials with volunteer and shadowing experience. For others, it may be a time to look at the national landscape and put deeper thought into what a career in medicine entails.

That may be of particular importance to potential applicants who have limited experience in clinical settings, according to John D. Schriner, PhD. He is associate dean for admissions and student affairs at Ohio University Heritage College of Osteopathic Medicine, one of 37 member schools of the AMA’s Accelerating Change in Medicine Consortium.

“It’s not necessarily what you see on TV,” Schriner said. “Getting out there and gaining experience beforehand is the whole point [of volunteering and shadowing], so you know whether or not this is a profession you want to commit to.

“In terms of taking a year off, if somebody is unsure they want to commit their life to medicine, a career you have to go into it with your eyes wide open, if it takes a gap year or growth year, maybe two years, that’s what you should do. Make sure you have the experience and insight you need to be
able to commit to this career path.”
Learn how COVID-19 is affecting medical school admissions.

How do medical students spend gap years?

When asked how they spent time off between undergrad and medical school, incoming medical students offered numerous answers on the AAMC survey. The most popular ones—with respondents allowed multiple answers—were:

- Worked in another career—53%.
- Worked to improve finances—38%.
- Worked or volunteered in research—45%.
- Pursued graduate studies—23%.
- Helped fulfill family obligations—22%.

“There’s a couple ways to look at it,” said Carol A. Terregino, MD, senior associate dean for education and academic affairs at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. “Some people think it’s important to have a break. Some people didn’t have enough volunteer experience or enough clinical experience, and they wanted to develop a track record. It’s a thoughtful reflection on what are the strengths and weaknesses of my application and how can it help me.”

Learn about the most heavily weighted factors in the medical school admissions process.

Making the most of your time

The reasons for taking a gap year are less important than how productive you are with that time. Making money or taking a break aren’t necessarily frowned upon, but if you didn’t stay connected through some form of community service, it may be questioned during the application process.

“Some people will put themselves through school and say I’m going to work at something unrelated for a year and make a lot of money,” Dr. Terregino said. “But, if they aren’t remaining connected to medicine and service in some meaningful way, if they are just working, it raises an eyebrow. Is this really a commitment for them?”

“The ability of a physician to connect with a patient is in many ways related to the number and types of experiences a physician has had. Just taking the time to grow and be more of a person is going to make someone a better physician. That’s a valuable piece to having a gap year.”

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.