How the pandemic has spiked stress for many med school applicants

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Even in the “before times,” applying to medical school was stressful. Survey results released in the spring, just before the COVID-19 pandemic hit hard in the U.S., showed that the rigors of the medical school application process caused a significant portion of pre-meds to reconsider whether they wanted to become physicians.

The pandemic is assuredly heightening those stressors, experts say.

“I don’t think we can underestimate how COVID is impacting the mental health of the entire population, never mind students who are preparing to apply to medical school,” said Carol A. Terregino, MD, senior associate dean for education and academic affairs at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, one of 37 member schools in the AMA Accelerating Change in Medical Education Consortium.

“There are fewer opportunities to engage in the humanistic activities, to shadow and volunteer to demonstrate one’s passion for medicine because of the pandemic and more time to focus on metrics and study for the MCAT [Medical College Admission Test]. And that isn’t necessarily a good thing.”

Find out how medical schools offer admissions flexibility during pandemic.

Stresses in premed life

The survey, conducted by Kaplan, draws from a sample of 400 pre-meds. Among some of the takeaways:

- Nearly 40% of survey respondents had considered dropping their pursuit of a career in medicine because of stress in the premed process.
26% of premeds said they experienced stress “pretty much always,” while 45% said they experienced it “frequently.” More than half of respondents said “self-medicating” (using alcohol or other drugs) is a common problem among their premed peers who are trying to deal with stress.

“It’s hard to think of an undergrad curriculum more demanding than the pre-med track,” said Petros Minasi, Kaplan’s senior director of pre-health programs. “Aspiring doctors have lots on their plate from tackling challenging courses like organic chemistry to preparing for the MCAT to building genuine relationships with professors who they will eventually look to for letters of recommendation. Add in the huge lifestyle and academic changes because of the coronavirus pandemic, and it’s easy to understand why life as a pre-med can be more than challenging for so many. But when that stress becomes chronic and overwhelming, it’s important to seek professional help or at the very least have a discussion with a close family member, trusted friend, or experienced advisor.”

The perspective of Dr. Terregino, an AMA member, may provide some solace to stressed out medical school applicants.

“Medicine is stressful. Getting ready for medical school is stressful. But I’d offer that one can temper their stress knowing it’s more than just grades and MCAT scores that admissions committees are looking for and there is a full understanding of the limitations on experiences placed by the pandemic. Personal development also counts.”

Growth during the pandemic

There has been application surge amid the pandemic, with medical school applicants up more than 15%, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC). The reasons behind that spike are varied, but there’s no denying that more applications mean more competition.

Managing the stress that pre-meds experience during an unprecedented application cycle relates to some of the competencies that make a good physician. Adaptability and comfort with ambiguity, for instance, are traits medical school admissions committees covet. Getting to the other side of the pandemic and entering medical school despite the tumult may reflect a flexible mindset that can carry over into treating patients, Dr. Terregino believes.

“When you go through stressful times and finally get through them, it makes you more empathic to the stresses that others experience,” Dr. Terregino said. “Students who are struggling—hopefully they are reaching out and getting the help they need. There are lessons to be learned from doing that. Then they will be there to support someone else who is in need someday.
“It’s an incredible privilege to care for patients and be a part of a patient’s life during hard times,” she added. “There’s nothing more rewarding than having that role. The fire in your belly to do just that may give you the resilience to not to give up.”

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 pre-med 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.