



American Medical Women's Association
The Vision and Voice of Women in Medicine since 1915

Is Medicine the Career For Me?

For many people the search for a career begins in high school. It is difficult to choose a career at this time because most high school students have never had the opportunity to see what people in various professions actually do from day to day. If you are the first person in your family to pursue a career in medicine, you will most likely have had little or no exposure to life as a physician and will want to take time to observe a role model. If you think you are interested in medicine, some suggestions that may help you make a decision follow.

Visit Your Guidance Office

If you are thinking about a career in medicine, a good first step is to visit your guidance office. Many guidance offices have resources that can help get you started, such as questionnaires that will direct you toward careers suited for your personality, books on what careers entail, and lists of colleges and the appropriate majors, etc. The counselors can also be a good source of information and can point you in the right direction to get started.

Talk to Medical Students and Physicians

After some basic research, it is useful to talk to physicians and medical students to get their opinions on the profession. Consider talking with your own family's physician or taking advantage of a family member, family friend or acquaintance from your school, church, synagogue, or community - with enough work, you are likely to find physicians and medical students who will talk with you. What do they like and dislike? What directions is medicine taking and how do they envision younger physicians fitting in? They will be able to answer questions for you and tell you more than books on the topic. Try to get a large sample of people in the profession because opinions vary widely.

Mentoring

"Having a mentor is understood to be the most effective way to acquire an understanding of all the "unwritten rules" of succeeding along most career paths. Women who prefer a woman mentor have fewer from whom to choose. Compared with the number of men physicians available as mentors, especially in surgery and surgical subspecialties, there are few women. Even in obstetrics and gynecology, where over 60% of residents are women, men still far outnumber women practitioners.

Think of mentoring as a dynamic reciprocal relationship with someone more advanced whom you respect. Today, a student may choose multiple mentors over the course of your career because you will need very different types of support and challenge at different stages of your development.

Effective mentor-student interactions balance three key elements: support, challenge, and a vision of the student's future career. While supporting their students, good mentors also challenge them to approach situations in new ways and point out inconsistencies in their actions and thinking. Mentors foster vision by stimulating discussions of the future.

If you are pursuing research, especially in a combined MD-PhD program, you will have a built-in mentor in your thesis adviser, laboratory director, or both.

Women and minorities tend to be less assertive when approaching potential mentors or asking for what they need from mentors. It has been found that women actually have a greater need for mentoring than men do. Mentors can provide the extra help in learning to think positively and strategically about their careers and to garner the necessary resources.

Be sure to maintain regular contact with your mentor; the frequency will vary depending on both of you just do not lose touch completely.

Many schools publish lists of faculty who wish to mentor students or a directory of women faculty usually via a Women in Medicine program or an energetic group of women students. A few medical schools have started mentoring programs for students.

From the very outset of your education as a professional, look for opportunities to expand your network of colleagues. Even if you have a mentor, it is useful to think in terms of several collegial relationships - individuals you can look to as coach, guide, advocate, role model, or advisor for different purposes and at different times.

Shadowing

You may have the opportunity to spend some time with a physician. You can ask your personal doctor if you can come in to observe her or him or ask for a recommendation of a doctor in your area who might be willing to let you watch. Observing a doctor in her or his office is called "shadowing" and can give you a good idea about what actually happens from day to day in the career. It will serve as a better representation than a weekly dose of *ER* or *Providence* on television.

Summer Internship

If you are still interested in medicine as a career after a few shadowing sessions, you may choose to make a larger commitment, such as an internship for the summer. Not only is this a great way for you to decide if you want to pursue the career further, it also shows future admissions office personnel that your interest in medicine is serious and that you have some experience in the field. Your guidance counselor at school may be able to help you set up an internship or you can go to a local hospital's human resources office. Some students also set up internships on their own with a private office.

Volunteering

There are many places at which you can volunteer that will help you decide whether a career in medicine is right for you. Hospitals, nursing homes, hospice programs, counseling centers, and local clinics are often in need of volunteers. You can fit volunteer work into your school schedule with as much time devoted to it as you feel comfortable.

Let the health care professionals that you volunteer with know that you are interested in a career in medicine and many of them will be glad to take you under their wing to teach you about their career. This can be a good first exposure to medicine.