

Career Counseling in Internal Medicine

Frequently-Asked Questions

This booklet has been prepared by the Department of Internal Medicine in response to questions frequently asked by medical students who wish to explore the training and career opportunities in this field. We hope that it will be helpful to students and serve as a basis of discussion in individual meetings with faculty members and residents.

- **Can you give me a brief description of the field? What are the key elements of this field that define it?**
 - Internal medicine is a rapidly evolving field which has seen enormous growth especially during the last century. It involves a combination of mastering the art of building the patient-doctor relationship, a keen ability to elicit a medical history and perform a thorough physical examination, and be able to think critically in order to diagnose and treat conditions conservatively with medication or identifying surgical emergencies. In fact, many of the other disciplines such as Anesthesia, Radiology, and Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation require their residents to complete a year of preliminary medicine before advancing to that specialty in order to create a solid foundation and fund of medical knowledge from which they can begin to build on. Key elements of this field include the ability to be a good listener, meticulous attention to detail, and above all ability to educate the patient on their condition beyond simply treating it.

- **What is the patient population that I will encounter? Will it include both children and adults? Will there be emergency work? What types of technology will I encounter?**
 - The population encountered in the field of medicine will vary. The variation is not limited only to age or race but to socioeconomic status as well depending on where you choose to practice. Most internists see exclusively adults but a few internists have added training allowing them to treat children also. While their day may not involve emergency work exclusively physicians practicing internal medicine have to be well aware of how certain common emergencies present. This is usually integrated in to their training as residents. Interestingly, Internal medicine is on the forefront of both pharmacological and technological innovation. The aim is to prevent or reduce morbidity and mortality through the use of novel medications or unique non-invasive diagnostic and therapeutic interventions.

- **Is it possible to describe the personality characteristics of many physicians in this field?**
 - Personality characteristics can vary among any field of medicine. However, most internal medicine doctors are very detail oriented. They strive for precision (e.g. reducing HgA1c<7). Additionally, they are both advocates for their patients as well as educators in helping educate patients, families, and colleagues about a condition or new treatments available.

- **How long is the training program/residency?**
 - Becoming an accredited Internal Medicine physician involves successful completion of a three year residency program. However, some internists decide to pursue further sub-specialty training among the many disciplines which are available (e.g. gastroenterology, nephrology, cardiology, etc.)

- **Are there fellowships available after residency?**
 - Yes. Fellowships are available among the different disciplines of medicine such as Cardiology, Gastroenterology, Pulmonology, and Nephrology to name a few.

- **How do I know if my academic record/grades will make me a suitable applicant?**
 - Typically, candidates who end up applying to this field tend to enjoy scholarly activities such as reading or even authoring scientific texts, embrace teaching, and excel in basic science such as physiology and biochemistry.

- **What is the role of my USMLE Step 1 score? What is a competitive score to qualify for an interview? If I failed Step 1 what are my options? Should I take Step 2 early**
 - The role of the USMLE Step 1 is designed to test the knowledge learned during the basic science years of medical school. The score represents your proficiency of those subjects and is a common tool used to measure the academic proficiency of all applicants. Failing Step 1 once does not necessarily disqualify you from obtaining a residency; however, it may hinder your efforts for applying for the more competitive residency spots. Overall, self assessment and reflection are key in identifying your weak areas and allowing you to focus on improving on them in order to successfully complete USMLE Step 1. While it is encouraged to complete Step 2 by many programs generally it is a good idea to take advantage of the information while it is still fresh in your mind and take Step 2 at the end of your core rotations.

- **Do I need a Step 2 Clinical Knowledge score to be screened for an interview? To be ranked?**
 - Generally most institutions require Step 2 Clinical Knowledge to be completed in order to be screened for an interview; however, this may not be the case for all institutions based on the mix of applicants (e.g. foreign medical graduates versus domestic graduates) who apply there annually.

- **Is there anything that I can do in my rotation or elective experience in this field to enhance my qualifications?**
 - Definitely! As with any field enthusiasm and participation is a must for enhancing your experience and qualifications. Being a active member of the team and contributing to daily discussions and rounds will not only lead to better patient care but will enhance your learning experience while on that rotation.

- **Should I take outside electives in other institutions? If so, how many are advised and allowed?**
 - Taking outside electives at other institutions depends on your strategy and goals. On one hand, if your aim is to gain exposure to the field of Medicine in a different institution and appreciate that institutions' culture it may be very rewarding both academically as well as the professional networking opportunities it may bring about—possibly leading to an interview for internship! On the other hand, the experience gained through performing outside electives is limited and may not prove as effective in giving you a competitive advantage. However, if your aim is to contribute to your current institution or its affiliates your time would probably be best spent by working very intimately with the faculty and staff of that institution allowing you to invest in creating a rapport over that period.

- **If your field requires a preliminary year what are your recommendations regarding that year?**
 - Medicine does not require you to complete a preliminary year before entering the discipline.

- **Is a research experience important in my application to this field? Do I need to do a one year research experience? Will research offset a low Step 1 score? Should I have publications to qualify for your field?**
 - While current or prior research experience is certainly not mandatory it is a great way to differentiate yourself from other candidates by demonstrating interest in scholarly activities, commitment to the contributing to a body of medical knowledge, as well as devotion to pursuit of the field of medicine. While not everyone who participates in research gets the chance to become a published author; however, doing so will certainly set you apart as well as being looked at in a very favorable light. Quality research can sometimes offset sub-optimal performance on your USMLE Step 1.

- **Is community service important in my application to this field?**
 - Community service is not mandatory for this field. However, it is highly encouraged since most physicians who practice internal medicine are very active members within the communities they serve. Their activities may range from being advocates for their patients to serving their community by actively educating its members on primary, secondary, and tertiary disease prevention.

- **What do you advise on obtaining letters of recommendation? Should they all be from the field? How many should I have? Do I need a chair's letter? If so, how do I obtain that letter?**
 - Obtaining a letter of recommendation, whether from an attending or departmental chair, can seem like a very daunting task since one may not be certain at the correct approach or fear of inconveniencing the letter writer. The best approach to obtain a letter of recommendation is to: 1) identify who you have worked closest with and know the best, 2) ask early with clear and concise objectives in mind, and 3) be genuine in your approach since false flattery may not get you anywhere. This is usually best done in person since there is still no

better substitute for direct, clear, old-fashioned communication. Certain institutions require letters from the Departmental Chair. This is usually found on that institutions website or by directly contacting the program and asking. While there is no limit to how many letter writers you can solicit you are probably best served by collecting 4-5 letters in which you can rest assured are good quality letters of recommendation.

- **How do I meet with residents in the field and ask them to share their experiences and advice? Can I find residents with educational backgrounds similar to mine?**
 - Generally, exposure time to residents in the field of medicine is plentiful as a medical student. Usually, it is as part of the medical team helping to treat patients. Academic activities such as grand rounds or noon conference are another great venue for such interaction. Most of all, finding residents with similar educational backgrounds also can be done by simply introducing yourself and actively seek out similar personality types.

- **If I want to learn more about the field, can you recommend how I do that?**
 - The most obvious approach would be to speak to our SUNY Downstate Medicine Chief Resident at 718-270-2467, the Program Director at 718-270-1566 or visit the Department of Medicine website at <http://www.downstate.edu/medweb/>. You could also visit the American College of Physicians Residents section and read on career counseling at http://www.acponline.org/residents_fellows/