

I am planning to apply to medical school but I have a disability. Should I disclose my disability?

INTRODUCTION

Medical training is a competitive, tough, and demanding course and a key point I want to make here is that the course will require you to learn, and perform in a variety of different environments. Some components of the course are purely brainwork, other aspects involve hands on pragmatic clinical skills and there is a strong focus on developing key communication skills such as asking questions, listening and explaining. Through working within groups, you will be required to develop a co-operative and approachable working style, in addition, an ability to engage in self-directed study is crucial to success.

You will learn medicine by listening, doing, thinking, and you will be examined on doing things, your ability to communicate, and your ability to learn knowledge and apply it to new situations. Of course, all students will have strengths and weaknesses in these different aspects, but on the medical course you can be tested on these components as stand-alone exams and therefore you need your weak areas to still be strong enough to progress successfully through the course. A medical degree is also a form of professional training and engagement on the course can be measured as part of the assessment of your professionalism - so absences from the course maybe a way the medical school measures a student's engagement and therefore their professionalism.

It is important for you to consider if your disability may have an effect on your ability to study on the course. Think about traditional academic studying, clinical assessments and work placements. Identify all aspects you can think of where you may be weak because of your disability. Once you have identified these you can start taking control to minimise the effects by considering what adjustments would be required in order for you to perform to your full potential, and enable you to demonstrate competency. An example of this is a student with hearing loss who requires the use of an amplified stethoscope when listening to the chest. All medical schools will support reasonable adjustments and so declaring your disability starts the process of ensuring you have the right adjustments at the right time.

Top tips for identifying and considering if adjustments are going to be required

WORK EXPERIENCE

Make use of work experience to explore the reality of being a doctor. Observe and consider if there are any aspects you may require an adjustment in order to support you in undertaking the role. An example of this is that there are an increasing use of technologies that can assist people.

AWARENESS OF THE REQUIRED COMPETENCIES ON GRADUATION

Before a medical school graduates any student from a medical programme, the student MUST be able to perform ALL practical clinical procedures set out in GMC publication 'Outcomes for Graduates'. You can access this document on the internet via www.gmc.uk.org. Clinical skills competencies, such as physical examination can require taking the weight of a leg, looking into someone's eyes, or listening to someone's heart, whilst fine motor skills may be required to insert a urinary catheter or take blood. Make use of any work experience to explore this further.

TOP TIP FOR OPEN DAYS

When attending open days enquire about reasonable adjustments that are already in place for the disability that you have. Alternatively, ask for the contact details of the Disability Officer who arranges any reasonable adjustments for medical students. This will allow you to talk through your disability on a one to one basis and they can explain the type of adjustments that have been put in place for others with a similar condition to yourself.

TOP TIP FOR INTERVIEW DAY

When attending an interview you are likely to be nervous and it is helpful if things go smoothly on the day. So consider if any arrangements need to be made in advance of your interview day. For example, if you are wheelchair user, let the administrators who are organising the interview know in advance. This will then ensure that the location for interview is wheelchair friendly.

TOP TIP WHEN CONSIDERING DISCLOSING A DISABILITY

Ask to see the medical schools confidentiality policy. This will give you information on how data about yourself and your health is protected. Declare early, don't wait until you have problems. Support and advice early on can enable you to reach your full potential right from the start. Students are ranked by the end of the programme and this can affect their choice in jobs on graduating. The medical schools ranking process may start from year 1 results onwards.

Key resources

With reference to disability:

The GMC website

GMC publications:

GMC 2019 Welcomed and Valued: Supporting disabled learners in medical education and training.

GMC 2015 Outcomes for Graduates

The GMC state that medical schools must only graduate medical students who can undertake the competence standards set by the GMC which are listed in this document. **This guidance is currently under review and the new guidance is due out in the last quarter of 2019**

Author

Dr Maggie Bunting is a Senior Lecturer at Norwich Medical School and has undertaken the role of Disability Liaison Officer for the past eleven years. As Director of Student Support, her role is to oversee the senior and personal advisers who advise guide and support medical students in order for those with a declared disability to achieve their full potential.