Chapter 1

The UKCAT and University

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▶ Understanding medicine and dentistry as careers
▶ Getting into medical or dental school
▶ Understanding the role of UKCAT in the application process

You can easily drift into a career path without really thinking about whether the career is right for you. This chapter explains what Medicine and Dentistry are like as careers, and what role UKCAT plays in the application process to these courses.

Looking at the Lifestyle

Getting into university to study medicine or dentistry is tough. Doctors and dentists are some of the most respected members of society. Medical and dental jobs retain an air of glamour and mystique in the eyes of the general public. And although the reality is often more challenging and more pedestrian than the fantasy of medical drama, these careers do have some unique benefits.

As a doctor or dentist, you earn extraordinary privileges. As well as receiving an excellent grounding in the sciences, you develop your communication skills, sharpen your deductive skills, and discover all sorts of intimate details about complete strangers along the way.

Medicine and dentistry are two of the few professions where you can incorporate both science and art into your daily working life. A career in medicine or dentistry comes with more job security than most jobs provide, along with an historically comfortable salary.
These jobs have downsides too. Doctors and dentists often cope with the less enjoyable disciplines of bureaucracy and organisational restructuring. They also face perennial threats to training time, remuneration, and education budgets. More fundamentally, the jobs are often exhausting, physically, mentally, and emotionally. Dealing with some of the most troubled and unwell people in the country every day can take its toll. Ask yourself whether that’s something you want to do, and why – a bit of honest soul-searching now may save you from agony later on.

If you still want to apply to medical or dental school, you need to overcome one of the toughest university degree application systems. Things weren’t always so complicated. When we started out, all we needed was a bit of relevant work experience, solid A-level predictions, and the ability to sound intelligent and vaguely enthusiastic in an interview. If you applied to Oxford you needed to navigate the little matter of the Oxford Entrance Exam but if you performed well, you got an offer based on two Es in your A-levels.

Barriers to admission are far higher today. Tomorrow’s doctors and dentists have to show intelligence and initiative, communication skills and commitment, and resilience and reliability. You need to demonstrate both breadth and depth of work experience, take part in significant extracurricular activities, have excellent AS results and A-level predictions, be prepared to take on large tuition fees with their associated loans, and be naturally talented and have practised enough to perform well in the extra exams universities make you sit such as the BioMedical Admissions Test (BMAT) and the United Kingdom Clinical Aptitude Test (UKCAT).

This increasing complexity isn’t due only to more people applying for courses. The situation is also because universities increasingly struggle to distinguish between good and great candidates on the basis of A-level predictions and results alone. We wait to see whether the recent introduction of the A* grade shifts the balance back to A-level results, but currently many universities consider good UKCAT scores vital. Because university admissions policies tend to change particularly slowly, there may be an organisational inertia against streamlining entrance requirements for fear that doing so would lead to a reduction in the quality of applicants to the best universities. Therefore, UKCAT is likely to remain a key part of the selection procedures for the foreseeable future.

Getting a good UKCAT score is crucial to your chances of success.

We often hear first-hand how worrying the UKCAT is to candidates. The good news is that with preparation, you can improve your eventual performance markedly. In this book we aim to help you do just that.
Applying to Read Medicine or Dentistry

If you’ve weighed the pros and cons of a career in medicine or dentistry and decided that’s what you really want to do, you need to know exactly how to go about it. The application process is long, and it starts early.

Use this section as a jumping-off point to research the medical fields further.

Considering the timeline

In Figure 1-1 we show a rough timeline of when to do what if you want to apply to medical or dental school. Use it to keep the big picture of the application process in mind.

Picking your A-levels

Unless you’re reading this book at a remarkably early stage, you’ve probably already chosen your A-levels. If you still have time to optimise your choices for medicine or dentistry, remember that chemistry is mandatory, and having biology really helps too. Many medical and dental applicants study physics or mathematics at A-level, but these subjects aren’t essential for getting into medical or dental school.

An increasing number of candidates sit more than three A-levels. Languages, psychology, and business studies are popular options for potential medical and dental students to demonstrate breadth of ability.

The choice is yours, but you need to expect to score highly in your chosen subject areas if you want even a hope of getting into medical or dental school.

Tip

Having the highest grades is much more important than having many grades. Assuming that you will do well in chemistry and biology, choose your other A-level(s) based on the subjects you’re likely to get As and A*s in, instead of just trying to cram in more sciences. General Studies doesn’t count towards your A-level total for Medicine or Dentistry so you must sit at least three other subjects.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Start Year 12</td>
<td>Decide if you might want to apply to Medicine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Choose appropriate A-Levels</td>
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<tr>
<td>Throughout Year 12</td>
<td>Research whether a career in Medicine is right for you; consider doing some work experience</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Do well across your AS subject to ensure good predictions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spring of Year 12</td>
<td>Start to narrow down your university choices</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Decide if you will need to apply for UKCAT and/or BMAT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May of Year 12</td>
<td>UKCAT applications open</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Start thinking about your Personal Statement, identifying any key gaps to fill during the Summer</td>
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<tr>
<td>July of Year 12</td>
<td>UKCAT testing begins</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Attend medical school open days to help you finalise your university choices; talk to current students to be sure</td>
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<tr>
<td>September of Year 13</td>
<td>UCAS applications open</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>UKCAT &amp; BMAT applications close</td>
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<tr>
<td>October of Year 13</td>
<td>Deadline for medical UCAS applications</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Last UKCAT test dates</td>
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<tr>
<td>November of Year 13</td>
<td>BMAT exam and results</td>
</tr>
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<td>November to March of Year 13</td>
<td>Medical school interviews and offers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>End of March marks the end of this phase</td>
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<tr>
<td>Summer of Year 13</td>
<td>Sit A-levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Get A-level results, meeting your offers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autumn of Year 13</td>
<td>Start Medical School</td>
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**Figure 1-1:** Timeline for applying to medical or dental school.
Chapter 1: The UKCAT and University

Choosing a university

The UK has 32 medical schools and 18 dental schools. All these schools provide a good standard of education. The exact name of the degree (and therefore the letters you get after your name on qualification) varies a little between institutions, but after completion of one of their courses you’re a fully-qualified doctor or dentist entitled to register provisionally with the General Medical Council or General Dental Council and able to begin working in the UK.

Choosing between schools on the basis of a given year’s statistics on applicant-to-place ratios is dangerous. Prospective students often spend hours searching through data tables stating how many applicants each medical or dental school gets in an attempt to calculate their chances of success. This strategy is deeply flawed: the raw statistics tell you little about the real nature of the competitive selection process at each university.

For instance, the applicant-to-place ratios at Oxford and Cambridge tend to be about half that of, say, Brighton. That doesn’t mean Brighton is harder to get into. Other factors interfere, such as only the best candidates daring to apply to Oxbridge and maybe people using Brighton as a ‘reserve’ option because the university’s based in a vibrant part of the country.

We recommend that you choose a medical or dental school based largely on its course structure, its teaching style and whether you think that you can meet its typical entrance requirements. The location of the school may also be relevant.

Be realistic but positive when choosing a medical or dental school. You have four slots on your Universities and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS) form to use on medical or dental schools, so you may feel that you can dare to aim high with one of your choices, on the basis that you feel more secure about your chances on your other choices.

Read each university’s prospectus, attend open days so you get a feel for the environment, and talk to current students for an unvarnished report on what life’s like for people living and studying there.

If you like the idea of research, consider applying to a school that offers an intercalated BSc degree. These courses often include a strong research element. Courses with intercalated degrees mean that you graduate at the end of your time at the university with a BSc degree as well as your medical or dental degree, at the cost of only one extra year at university.
The Oxford MA

Oxford University is unusual in that although your intercalated degree is called a BSc (Bachelor of Sciences) as you actually do the course, the degree conferred is a BA (Bachelor of Arts). This odd result is because Oxford traditionally doesn’t award BSc degrees.

Another quirk of Oxford’s system is that you can upgrade your BA to an MA (Master of Arts) if you pay a small fee seven years after you first started your course. Oxford has some valid historical reasons for this anomaly, but one of the more amusing whimsical explanations is that Oxford considered its undergraduate teaching to be of such high quality that you needed a further four years after graduation to fully internalise all its lessons, by which time you were surely worthy of a Master’s degree.

Writing a good personal statement

The only information a medical or dental school has on you is your UCAS application form and your UKCAT and/or BMAT results. Therefore, you can probably see the importance of doing well in the UKCAT and how crucial your UCAS form is. Most of the UCAS form is fairly straightforward, but the personal statement can distinguish you from everyone else.

Your personal statement must be engaging to read. It should highlight your reasons for choosing medicine or dentistry, how you’ve demonstrated your commitment to the career, and the soft skills (which we explain in the later section ‘Working on your soft skills’) you’ve acquired so far. Do not expect to write your personal statement in an afternoon.

Start writing your personal statement months before the application deadline. Starting early gives you time to identify any gaps early and undertake the necessary work to plug the holes, helping you to create a more compelling and coherent personal statement.

We recommend you give the statement a linear narrative structure, with a beginning, middle, and end. Each paragraph should flow smoothly from the previous one, yet also make sense in isolation.

By the conclusion, the reader must be convinced that you’ve a realistic and enthusiastic view of medicine or dentistry and have proven to your and their satisfaction that you’ve worked hard to get the real-life experience to formulate that viewpoint. The reader must also feel confident that you have not only the academic skills but also the communication and leadership skills that go along with being a doctor or dentist. Describing the personal insights you’ve gained by reflecting on your work experience and extracurricular activities can go a long way toward demonstrating this level of maturity.
Although many universities use a standardised marking scheme to grade your personal statement, good writing skills are still vital, because the reader can easily identify and score the areas they’re looking for in a well-written personal statement.

Bad spelling, poor grammar, and inferior use of language have torpedoed many a personal statement. Bad writing comes across as immature and lacking in confidence. We also suggest that you avoid bizarre or highly controversial opinions, as they may expose a poorly thought-through position on a sensitive topic.

**Getting work experience**

Work experience needs to demonstrate your commitment to medicine or dentistry as a career. In many respects, where you go and how long you work are less important than being able to explain what you learned.

If possible, try to get experience both in the high-powered side of medicine and dentistry (operating theatres, consultant clinics, cosmetic dentistry, maybe even management meetings) and at the ‘coal face’ of hospice work and Emergency Departments (the modern name for Accident & Emergency or Casualty). This not only broadens your understanding of your future career, but also and lets you compare and contrast the two settings. If you express these insights clearly and concisely in your personal statement, you’ll come across as a much more rounded and mature applicant than someone who simply lists what they did on their work experience.

Arranging work placements can be tricky. If your school or social circle lacks good contacts, a sensible starting point is to make an appointment with your local GP or dentist to talk through your interest in a career in medicine or dentistry.

Work experience rarely organises itself: you have to make the effort to reach out to people and organisations in your local community who can help. Many opportunities exist for motivated individuals. Remember that charities and the non-profit sector are often keen for free and enthusiastic help.

**Working on your soft skills**

A high level of academic ability and productive work experience make for a strong package. To become a doctor or dentist, however, you also need to prove that you have soft skills: leadership potential, communication skills, and charisma.
These soft skills improve with practice. For most people, the easiest way to get that practice is to get involved in extracurricular activities that encourage the development of these traits. Think about any sports you do, clubs you belong to and groups such as Scouts and Cadets and you can probably channel all these settings to give you some soft skills experience. This experience can be a great store of anecdotes for you to talk about on your personal statement and in your interview.

**Sitting entrance exams such as UKCAT**

Almost all applicants to medical and dental school need to sit extra exams in addition to their A-levels. Oxford, Cambridge, Imperial, and UCL request that medical applicants sit BMAT. The vast majority of the other medical schools and nine of the dental schools require you to sit UKCAT.

As you have four potential slots on your UCAS form, your choices may span the range of these schools. For medical applicants, that can mean the need to sit both exams. That makes for a hectic and exhausting year.

UKCAT and BMAT test different domains. BMAT focuses more on raw current academic ability, whereas UKCAT assesses aptitude and potential. Both UKCAT and BMAT performance improve with practice and familiarity, so if you need to sit UKCAT, keep reading this book.

**Preparing for interviews**

If you’ve got an interview with a medical or dental school, you’re doing well. Most of the cull in applicant numbers takes place before this stage, so you’re ahead of most of your competition by the time the school invites you for an interview.

Performing at your best in interviews can be difficult, even if you’re experienced. You have to be consistent with the information on your personal statement but still come across as fresh, enthusiastic, and personable.

Ask your friends and family to practise interviews with you. If you have a teacher at school willing to conduct mock interviews, that can be a great way to get constructive feedback on your strengths and weaknesses. Dedicated interview skills workshops (such as those offered by us at www.getintomedicalschool.org) can provide this feedback and help you focus on the key messages you need to get across to the interviewer.