

## Charting the maze of career choices in medical school: a journey beyond the stethoscope

### Mapeando o labirinto de escolhas de carreira na graduação em medicina: uma jornada além do estetoscópio

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**ABSTRACT:** Deciding a career path in medical school is a challenging journey, filled with choices about specialties, priorities, and time management. Beyond acquiring medical knowledge, students must cultivate empathy, self-awareness, and a commitment to care. Mentorship is vital, guiding students through uncertainties and fostering their growth. Success in medicine requires not only technical expertise but also curiosity, adaptability, and the willingness to explore knowledge beyond textbooks. Financial rewards will follow dedication and reputation, but true fulfillment comes from embracing the responsibility to care. As technology advances, the irreplaceable human touch remains central to being a physician, shaping a purposeful and impactful career.

**KEYWORDS:** Career Choices. Medical Mentorship. Empathy in Medicine. Professional Responsibility. Lifelong Learning.

**RESUMO:** Decidir uma carreira na faculdade de medicina é uma jornada desafiadora, cheia de escolhas sobre especialidades, prioridades e gerenciamento de tempo. Além de adquirir conhecimento médico, os alunos devem cultivar empatia, autoconsciência e comprometimento com o cuidado. A mentoria é vital, guiando os alunos através das incertezas e promovendo seu crescimento. O sucesso na medicina requer não apenas conhecimento técnico, mas também curiosidade, adaptabilidade e disposição para explorar o conhecimento além dos livros didáticos. As recompensas financeiras seguem a dedicação e a reputação, mas a verdadeira realização vem de abraçar a responsabilidade de cuidar. À medida que a tecnologia avança, o toque humano insubstituível continua sendo central para ser um médico, moldando uma carreira com propósito e impacto

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Escolhas de Carreira. Mentoria Médica. Empatia em Medicina. Responsabilidade Profissional. Aprendizagem Permanente.

The decision-making process for medical students when it comes to career choices is a labyrinth, intricate and laden with pressure. Each pathway is filled with promises and challenges, demanding clarity amidst the chaos of expectations. Medical school is a professional course, one that does not merely teach you to diagnose diseases but molds you into a person who will soon carry the weighty responsibility of life and death on your shoulders. And when that day comes — whether you are 30,000 feet in the air with a passenger in distress or on a crowded street where a stranger collapses — being a physician means knowing that you have to step up. This is a calling, not just a career, and every step of your training must be approached with that level of seriousness. Recently, my son, a newly accepted medical student, and I co-authored a piece reflecting on the medical profession, emphasizing the profound commitment and lifelong dedication it takes to truly honor the calling of caring for others.<sup>1</sup>

This journey is full of choices. What specialty to pursue? Should you focus on research or clinical practice? How much time should you dedicate to reading textbooks versus attending conferences or engaging in extracurricular activities? There is a lingering pressure to prioritize everything, as though every missed opportunity could somehow derail your entire future. But while this anxiety is real, it can be managed if you realize that success is a complex blend of factors — opportunity, dedication, adaptability, antifragility, and the ability to think outside of conventional paths. Challenges are inevitable in a field governed by the laws of uncertainty.<sup>2</sup> Embracing resilience prepares you to confront these uncertainties and turn them into opportunities for growth and success.<sup>3,4</sup>

Yet, it is also essential to recognize that not all knowledge comes from the pages of a medical textbook. You are entering a world where understanding the human condition is as critical as understanding physiology or pathology.<sup>2</sup> Read beyond your curriculum — embrace literature, history, and philosophy. These are not mere distractions; they are the tools that shape perspective, the resources that help you see beyond the immediate and the obvious.

Understanding how people think, how they navigate life and its challenges, and how faith, culture, and philosophy influence their decisions — these insights will make you not just a better physician but a more empathetic and effective leader.

But self-awareness is key. You must continually assess your strengths and weaknesses. This is not about dwelling on failures but about identifying which limitations you should address and what strengths you need to sharpen. It is not enough to be competent; you must strive for excellence. To do this, seek out mentors who can guide your growth and development.<sup>5</sup> Finding a mentor is like finding a compass — it is not always easy, but when you find one, they can help you navigate the most difficult terrain.<sup>6</sup> Good mentors do not just teach — they challenge you, push you to question the status quo, and help you see your potential even when you cannot.

The qualities of a great mentor? Look for someone who embodies the ideals of medicine you aspire to — whether it is their clinical expertise, dedication to research, or ability to balance work and life. A mentor should challenge your thinking, expose you to new ideas, and, most importantly, remind you that medicine is about more than knowledge — it is about purpose. They teach you that while caring sometimes means curing, it more often involves being present, listening, and easing suffering.<sup>2</sup> Over a decade of mentoring students in health-related fields, I have learned that the essence of being a great mentor lies in focusing on the individual, not just the outcomes. Building the next generation of physicians and scientists capable of transforming the world is a far greater legacy than publishing the next high-profile paper. Mentors carry the profound responsibility of nurturing their mentees' potential, using their time and energy to cultivate growth rather than merely extract results.

In the chaos of medical school, there is a constant fear about what lies ahead. How do you pick the right specialty? Will your interests today still be your passion tomorrow? This uncertainty can be paralyzing, but clarity often comes from embracing the unknown. The best advice I can offer is to stay open to possibilities,

understand that your path may not be linear, and know that the destination is less important than the values you uphold along the way. Focus on building a foundation of curiosity, discipline, and a genuine love for learning — because those will carry you through the inevitable changes and challenges.

There is no denying that financial concerns loom large over these decisions. The sacrifices of time, energy, and emotion that medical school demands can seem daunting when you consider the delayed gratification of a stable salary. But remember this: compensation will come as a byproduct of your commitment to excellence. Build your reputation through the quality of your care, the depth of your knowledge, and the strength of your network. Money follows those who excel, but true fulfillment comes from knowing that you have built a career on principles that matter.

And in this era of artificial intelligence, where technology is rapidly transforming medicine, it is crucial to remember that the core of our profession cannot be replaced. Artificial intelligence can assist in diagnosing and even predicting outcomes, but it cannot understand a patient's fear, or how to comfort a grieving family.<sup>2</sup> It cannot replace the trust that patients place in your hands. Embrace technology, learn to work with it, but never lose sight of what makes you irreplaceable — your ability to care deeply for another human being.

Medical school is not just a step toward a degree; it is the foundation of a lifelong commitment to others. It is a time to explore the world beyond yourself, to challenge your limits, and to become the kind of person you would trust in your most vulnerable moments. Take this time to cultivate wisdom as well as knowledge. Seek mentors who challenge you, broaden your horizons, and guide you toward becoming the best version of yourself. Embrace the resilience you'll need to navigate the uncertainties of medicine and life. This journey goes beyond acquiring skills; it is about becoming the kind of physician who understands that stepping up is an inherent part of the calling.

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