Audio file

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Transcript

00:00:02 Casey Ellis

Welcome to the Pre-Professional Playbook podcast, where preparation and hard work come together.

00:00:07 Casey Ellis

This podcast explores pathways in the health and law professions to help you format your future.

00:00:12 Casey Ellis

I'm your host, Casey Ellis, an advisor in the University of Georgia's Pre-Professional Advising Office.

00:00:18 Casey Ellis

Whether you're just starting out, considering a career shift, or just wanting to know more, this episode is your guide to navigating the various educational and professional options available.

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Today we are discussing the field of medicine.

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From pre-med prerequisites to residency, we'll cover what it means to be a physician.

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This episode is your warm-up for the training it takes to step into the field of medicine and stay in the game.

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Physicians are licensed medical doctors who diagnose and treat illnesses, prescribe medications, and perform procedures ranging from routine to highly specialized.

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Their work is centered on patient care, whether that means managing chronic conditions, performing preventive screenings, or educating patients about their health.

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Physicians can specialize in fields like internal medicine, pediatrics, surgery, psychiatry, and dermatology, each with its own unique focus and skillset.

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They work in diverse environments, including hospitals, private practices, academic institutions, and research facilities.

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But the impact of physicians goes far beyond the clinic.

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Many are involved in medical research, contributing to breakthroughs in treatment and understanding of diseases.

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Others teach in medical schools, shaping the next generation of healthcare professionals.

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Some take on leadership roles in hospital administration or public health, influencing policy and improving healthcare systems.

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Becoming a physician is a rigorous journey that includes undergraduate education, often on a pre-med track, four years of medical school, and several years of residency training.

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Some pursue fellowships for further specialization.

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It's a demanding path but one that offers the opportunity to make a profound difference in people's lives.

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When exploring careers in medicine, you'll often hear about two types of physicians: MDs and DOs.

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MD stands for Doctor of Medicine and DO stands for Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine.

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Both are fully licensed physicians who can diagnose illnesses, prescribe medications, and perform surgeries.

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The key difference lies in their training and philosophy.

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MDs follow an allopathic approach, which focuses on treating symptoms and diseases using conventional methods like medications and surgery.

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DOs, while trained in the same core medical sciences, also emphasize a holistic approach, treating the whole person, including mind, body, and spirit.

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They receive additional training in osteopathic manipulative medicine, a hands-on technique used to diagnose and treat musculoskeletal issues.

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Despite these philosophical differences, MDs and DOs often work side by side in hospitals and clinics, and both paths require rigorous education, including medical school, residency, and licensing exams.

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Ultimately, the choice between MD and DO often comes down to personal values and preferences.

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According to the American Medical Association, there are several work environments for physicians, including owning a solo practice, an equity owner of a group practice, an

employee of a group practice, hospital, or healthcare system, and an employee of an academic institution.

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in hospitals, providing inpatient and emergency care for patients with acute or complex conditions.

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Others work in outpatient clinics, where they focus on routine visits, preventative care, and managing chronic illnesses.

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Physicians may also work in community health centers or rural clinics, helping expand access to care for underserved populations.

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The field of medicine includes over 200 specialties and subspecialties, ranging from primary care fields like family medicine, internal medicine, and pediatrics to specialized areas such as cardiology, dermatology, psychiatry, and orthopedic surgery.

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Each specialty has its own training path, patient population, and scope of practice.

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For example, emergency medicine physicians thrive in fast-paced hospital ERs, while dermatologists often work in outpatient clinics focusing on skin health.

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This variety allows aspiring physicians to find a specialty that aligns with their interests, skills, and lifestyle goals.

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One of the most common misconceptions among pre-med students is that they need to know exactly what kind of physician they want to become before even starting medical school.

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The truth is, it's perfectly normal, and even expected, to explore different specialties along the way.

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During medical school, students are exposed to many different specialties, such as internal medicine, surgery, psychiatry, and dermatology, through clinical rotations and hands-on patient care.

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These opportunities help students discover their interest,

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and preferred work environments.

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Some students enter medical school with a clear goal and stick to it, while others change direction multiple times before settling on a specialty.

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What matters most early on is building a strong foundation in science, developing critical thinking and communication skills, and staying open to learning.

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The journey to becoming a physician is a process of discovery and there's no pressure to have it all figured out from the start.

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Physicians practice in a wide range of settings that reflect the diversity of their specialties and the needs of the communities they serve.

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Many work in clinical environments, such as hospitals, outpatient clinics, and private practices, where they provide direct patient care, diagnosing illnesses, performing procedures, and managing treatment plans.

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Others work in non-clinical settings, including government agencies, non-profit organizations, insurance companies, and academic institutions, where they may focus on research, policy, education, or administration.

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Although requirements do vary from program to program, medical schools generally require one year of general chemistry with lab, Chem 1211 and 1212 with labs, one year of organic chemistry with lab, Chem 2211 and 2212 with labs,

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One year of biology with lab, biology 1107 and 1108 with labs, one year of physics with lab, physics 1111 and 1112 with labs, or physics 1211 and 1212 with labs.

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one semester of Biochemistry, BCMB 3100 or BCMB 4010 and 4020, one year of English, English 1101 and English 1102, Statistics, STAT 2000 or Biostats 2010, Physiology, which could be V5 3100, CBIO 3710 or PMCY 3000, or both CBIO 2200 and 2210.

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These courses are strongly recommended before the MCAT.

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General Psychology, Psychology 1101, is encouraged for the psychological, social, and biological foundations of behavior.

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AP credit is commonly not accepted for biology, chemistry, and sometimes physics.

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You can take the courses in college or take an upper-level course with a lab in the area of AP.

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Some schools require courses in calculus, social sciences, English, upper-level biologies, and the humanities.

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A 3.7 GPA, science, and overall is competitive for med school, with a 3.5 being on the lower end.

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Avoid patterns like frequent withdrawals, poor performance, or taking hard sciences outside of UGA or online.

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Aim for 14 to 16 credit hours per semester, with two hard sciences on average, except for your first semester of college and your MCAT prep term.

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At its core, the MCAT is more than a science test.

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It's a critical thinking exam designed to assess how well you apply knowledge and not just memorize it.

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The test is long, lasting about 7 hours and 30 minutes with breaks, and includes 4 sections, chemical and physical foundations, biological and biochemical foundations, psychological and social foundations, and critical analysis and reasoning skills.

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To stay competitive, aim for a score in the 85th percentile, around a 512, though DO schools tend to be more flexible.

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Timing is key.

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Since scores are released about 30 days after your test date, plan to take the MCAT no later than early to mid-June of your application year, with the earliest recommended time being August or September of junior year.

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Spring test dates open for registration in October, and the MCAT is typically not offered in February or October through December.

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Preparing well means studying for three to six months, logging 250 to 400 hours, and taking 5 to 10 full-length practice exams, especially from the Association of American Medical Colleges.

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Focus on practice questions over content review and treat each exam as a learning opportunity.

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Rehearse your test day routine, disconnect from distractions, and take one day off each week to avoid burnout.

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Remember, the MCAT is a mile wide and an inch deep, so mastering how to think through questions is just as important as knowing the content.

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The Pre-Professional Advising Office has a resource library where you can check out study materials for free.

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All medical schools use a primary application for admissions.

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The 2 applications are AMCAS and ACAMAS.

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Those applying to MD programs will apply via AMCAS.

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If an applicant is considering DO programs, they will apply via ACAMAS.

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These applications typically open in May.

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ACAMAS opens the first Monday in May.

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The other applications open in early May and the exact date can change.

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AMCAS prevents applicants from submitting their application until the end of May.

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AMCAS and ACAMAS allow the medical school to set application deadlines.

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Always apply early to the medical schools of your choice as most of the schools use rolling admissions.

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More goes into the medical school application than just numbers.

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It's important to show that you can go the distance.

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The path to medical school is a marathon, not a sprint.

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Admissions committees want to see the why behind the things you do.

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You can show commitment, reflection, and maturity through your commitment to service, educational experiences, teamwork and leadership, and meaningful exposure to the field.

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As you aim to be well-rounded, don't forget authenticity matters.

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Don't just be involved in things because you think it's what admissions committees want to see.

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Do the things you care about, something where you want to make a difference or impact.

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Before applying to medical school, it's essential to reflect deeply on your values, experiences, and motivations to build a meaningful personal narrative.

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This reflection should inform your personal statement, activity entries, secondary essays, and interview responses.

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One effective method for deeper reflection is the what, so what, now what model.

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Begin by describing the experience, what happened, your role, and the context.

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Then, explore its significance by considering what you learned, how it impacted your perspective, and why it matters in your journey to medicine.

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Finally, reflect on how the experience will influence your future actions, goals, or approach to patient care.

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As you write, focus on the competencies that medical schools seek, such as service orientation, teamwork, cultural competence, ethical responsibility, and resilience.

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Use clear, specific examples that demonstrate these skills in action, showing not just what you did but how you grew and what you'll carry forward into your medical career.

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A journal can be a powerful tool in this process, helping you track insights and articulate your development over time.

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Shadowing is a vital part of the pre-med journey, offering students a firsthand look at the daily responsibilities of physicians.

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It's recommended that students complete a minimum of 40 to 60 hours of shadowing, with three to five different physicians across various specialties.

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This variety helps build a well-rounded understanding of the medical field and allows students to observe different styles of patient care, workflows, and clinical environments.

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Shadowing typically involves quietly observing a physician's routine, especially their interactions with patients, decision-making processes, and collaboration with other healthcare professionals.

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While shadowing is valuable for gaining insight into the profession, medical school admissions committees often place even greater emphasis on experiences that involve direct patient interaction, such as volunteering in clinics or working as a medical scribe.

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Most students pursue shadowing opportunities during summer breaks or academic holidays when they have more flexibility to commit time to these experiences.

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Ultimately, shadowing helps students confirm their interest in medicine and strengthens their applications by demonstrating initiative and exposure to clinical settings.

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Gaining hands-on experience with patients is one of the most important steps in preparing for medical school.

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It is a good idea to have at least 100 to 200 hours of clinical experience in one or two settings, ideally spread out over time to show consistency and commitment.

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This experience can come from clinical volunteering or paid roles such as medical assistant, EMT, or certified nursing assistant.

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The goal is to demonstrate a genuine interest in patient care and a deeper understanding of the healthcare system.

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While shadowing offers valuable observation, direct patient interaction is even more impactful.

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It allows students to build empathy, communication skills, and a clearer sense of what it means to be a physician.

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U.S.-based experiences are preferred over short-term or international programs.

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Roles in hospice or home healthcare are also highly valued, especially when they involve meaningful engagement with patients and families.

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These experiences not only strengthen your application but also help you confirm your motivation for pursuing medicine.

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Demonstrating genuine care for underserved communities is a powerful way to show your commitment to medicine.

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Medical schools highly value consistent, hands-on service that reflects your personal passions and exposes you to real-world social issues.

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This kind of engagement goes beyond checking a box.

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It's about building relationships, understanding barriers to care, and developing empathy.

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Depth of involvement is important, so sustained commitment in one or two meaningful roles is often more impactful than brief participation in many.

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Face-to-face volunteer work, such as helping in free clinics, mentoring youth, or supporting public health initiatives, allows aspiring physicians to connect directly with individuals and communities in need.

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These experiences not only strengthen your application but also shape your perspective on healthcare and reinforce your motivation to serve others through medicine.

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If you're interested in research, it's recommended to spend at least a year working in any discipline, whether through course credit, volunteering in a lab, paid positions, or structured summer programs.

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Medical schools value research because it offers insight into how knowledge is created and refined, especially in settings that use the scientific method and involve collecting primary data.

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Starting early is key, and one of the best strategies is to e-mail faculty members whose work interests you.

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Expect to reach out to 20 to 30 before finding a match.

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While any research experience is beneficial, those that are long-term and involve active participation in data collection and analysis tend to be the most impactful.

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Engaging in research not only strengthens your application but also helps you develop critical thinking skills and a deeper appreciation for evidence-based medicine.

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Leadership and teamwork are essential qualities that medical schools look for, and they don't require fancy titles to stand out.

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What matters most is your ability to take responsibility and make a meaningful impact.

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Whether you're mentoring a peer, tutoring students, serving as a campus ambassador, or leading a volunteer shift, these roles show initiative, reliability, and the ability to guide others.

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Medical schools value consistent, hands-on involvement where you've helped others grow, solved problems, or contributed to a team's success.

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It's not about how impressive the title sounds it's about how you show up, support others, and take ownership of your role.

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So when choosing leadership opportunities, focus on depth and impact, not just resume building.

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Medical schools across the U.S.

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use the AAMC core competencies as a framework to evaluate applicants holistically, not just by grades and test scores but by the qualities that make a great physician.

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These competencies are grouped into four categories: professional, thinking and reasoning, science, and interpersonal.

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Professional competencies include traits like ethical responsibility, empathy, cultural humility, and a commitment to growth.

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Thinking and reasoning skills cover critical thinking, scientific inquiry, and written communication.

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Scientific competencies focus on understanding living systems and human behavior, while interpersonal competencies emphasize teamwork, service orientation, and oral communication.

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Medical schools look for evidence of these traits in your experiences, essays, and interviews.

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Whether you're volunteering, conducting research, shadowing, or working in clinical settings, reflecting on how these activities helped you grow in these areas can make your application more competitive.

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Most medical schools require three to five letters of recommendation, though the exact number can vary depending on the school.

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Through AMCAS, applicants can submit a maximum of seven letters, but many schools prefer fewer.

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There is no one-size-fits-all playbook for letters of recommendation because med schools differ on what they require.

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Each medical school has their own regulations, not just on how many letters, but also who they want letters from.

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Typically, schools want a few science professors, one non-science professor,

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However, this is not always the case.

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Therefore, it's critical to research the schools you are applying to and start thinking about making connections early.

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It's just as important to choose recommenders who genuinely know you and can speak to your strengths.

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Admissions committees want letters that offer insight into your character, work ethic, and potential.

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It is also important to note that the pre-professional advising office does not write committee letters.

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Medical school typically spans 8 years.

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Four years of undergraduate education followed by four years of medical school.

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Once admitted, students begin with foundational coursework in subjects like anatomy, physiology, and pharmacology.

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Next, they transition into clinical rotations where they gain hands-on experience in various specialties such as internal medicine, surgery, pediatrics, and psychiatry.

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Residency is the next major step after medical school, where new doctors receive hands-on training in their chosen specialty.

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The length of residency varies depending on the field, typically ranging from three to seven years.

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For example, internal medicine, pediatrics, and family medicine usually require three years, while specialties like anesthesiology, dermatology, and psychiatry take about four years.

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More complex surgical fields, such as general surgery, orthopedic surgery, and urology, often requires five years of training.

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The most extended residencies are highly specialized areas like neurosurgery and thoracic surgery, which can take seven years or more to complete.

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Some physicians also choose to pursue a fellowship after residency, adding another one to three years of subspecialty training.

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The career outlook for physicians remains strong in 2026, with steady demand across specialties and settings.

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According to the U.S.

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Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment for physicians and surgeons is projected to grow by 4% from 2023 to 2033.

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This is about as fast as the average for all occupations.

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This growth is driven by an aging population, increased access to healthcare, and ongoing medical advancements.

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In terms of salary, physicians continue to earn among the highest wages of any profession.

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The median annual pay for physicians and surgeons is equal to or greater than $239K, but compensation varies widely by specialty.

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For example, neurosurgeons top the list with average earnings around $749K, while family medicine physicians earn closer to $319K annually.

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Geographic location also plays a role, with cities like Rochester, Minnesota, and St.

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Louis, Missouri offering some of the highest average physician salaries in the country.

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Despite challenges like staffing shortages and reimbursement changes, medicine remains a financially and professionally rewarding career path.

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From cutting-edge research to everyday clinical decisions, medicine is always evolving, and the next generation of physicians will help shape where it goes next.

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It's a field where the playbook is always expanding and the game is never static.

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Remember, the field of medicine is about being part of a team that innovates and shows up day after day.

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Don't forget to subscribe, leave a review, and share this episode with your teammates and colleagues.

00:21:13 Casey Ellis

Catch you next time on the Pre-Professional Playbook podcast.