

# MEDSTART BIBLE

General **Medical Interview Skills**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction	6
1.1 Welcome	6
1.2 How to use this guide	7
1.3 What are the interviewers looking for?	8
2. Types of interviews	10
2.1 interview	10
2.2 Structured interview	10
2.3 Semi structured interview	11
2.4 Problems with the structured and semi structured interview format	11
2.5 Multiple Mini Interview (MMI)	12
2.6 Composition of the interview panel	16
3. How to prepare	17
3.1 Steps in preparation	17
3.2 When should I commence preparation?	18
3.3 Prepare, not rehearse	19
3.4 Construct an ongoing answer book	20
3.5 Cultivate positive qualities in yourself as much as possible	20
3.6 Research the medical school	20
3.7 Complete a mock interview	22
3.8 How to conduct your own mock interview	23
3.9 Adequately balance preparation and practice	24
3.10 Know every element of your written application	24
3.11 Anticipate and address any 'weaknesses' in your application	25
3.12 Volunteer or gain relevant work experience	25

4. Interview techniques	26
4.1 The interview is a place where you SHOW them who you are	26
4.2 Interviews are subjective by definition	26
4.3 Communication skills are vital, and the interview is where they are assessed	27
4.4 Improve your likeability	27
4.5 Boasting, arrogance and how to avoid it	28
4.6 Spontaneity	29
4.7 First impressions	30
4.8 Humility and self deprecation	30
4.9 Humour	30
4.10 Do not ask clarification questions unless completely necessary	30
4.11 Practice verbal techniques	30
4.12 Practice non verbal techniques (body language)	33
4.13 ENERGY!	35
4.14 Plan what you will do when you don't know an answer	36
4.15 Handle silence	36
4.16 Multistation Mini Interview (MMI) specific techniques	37
5. How to answer questions	38
5.1 Steps to answering questions	38
5.2 The power of anecdotes	39
5.3 Listen!	39
5.4 Expressing an opinion	40
6. Selection criteria	41
6.1 General goal of interviews	41
6.2 Personal qualities to convey	41
6.3 Motivation for a medical career	43
6.4 Compassion and empathy	43
6.5 Personal maturity, resilience and ability to cope with pressure	44

6.6 Integrity and honesty	45
6.7 Interpersonal skills	45
6.8 Leadership and teamwork	46
6.9 Your fit with the medical school	46
6.10 Put yourself in the shoes of the interviewer	46
7. Formulating your prepared responses	48
7.1 Focus on what you want to say, not how you are going to say it	48
7.2 Make your responses unique in a positive way	49
7.3 Tell them a story with each response	49
7.4 Structure your answer well – stick to 3 or 4 points	49
7.5 Keep your answers to 1.5 – 3 minutes in length	50
7.6 Make sure you answer the question directly	51
7.7 Use facts and examples to substantiate your answers	51
7.8 The power of anecdotes	52
7.9 Use the STAR structure for examples and anecdotes	54
7.10 Create a list of all your experiences prior to preparing responses	54
7.11 Only talk about what you know	55
7.12 Be consistent – with both your application and your previous responses	55
7.13 If your family is full of doctors – avoid mentioning this	55
8. On the day	56
8.1 Scheduling your interview time	56
8.2 The night before	56
8.3 Eat as normal	57
8.4 Get into a good state and adopt a positive mental attitude	57
8.5 Read your list of experiences on the morning of the interview	58
8.6 Behave appropriately prior to the interview	59
8.7 First impressions	59
8.8 Dress code and grooming	60

8.9 Initial behaviour and personality	61
8.10 Listen	61
8.11 Pay attention to the nonverbal cues of the interviewer	62
8.12 Concluding the interview	62
8.13 Length of the interview	63
9. Interview questions	64
9.1 Categorisation of interview questions	64
9.2 Personal introduction questions	65
9.3 Motivation questions	66
9.4 Medicine specific questions	67
9.5 Introspective questions	67
9.6 Family and friends	69
9.7 Communication and empathy questions	69
9.8 Leadership questions	69
9.9 University specific questions	70
9.10 Health issues and general medical knowledge	71
9.11 Work experience questions	71
9.12 Concluding questions	72
9.13 Other questions	72

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 WELCOME

Congratulations. If you are reading this bible you are likely a student who has excelled in their UMAT and/or academic performance and is anticipating an offer for a medical interview. You have recognised that the interview is an important part of the admissions process in many universities and understand the need for effective preparation.

This guide has been designed to be the most comprehensive one stop resource for everything you need to know about medical interviews. While it is primarily focussed on undergraduate interviews, the information is also relevant and transferrable to postgraduate medical interviews. In conjunction with the Interview Blitz™ package and associated resources, you will have all the information you need to undertake effective preparation to the most important interview of your medical career.

The information that is contained in this guide has been gathered from experts in interview technique, doctors and medical academics, members of interview panels and from years of feedback from students who have attended past interviews.

While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in this guide, no guarantee is made. Universities can change the format, content and criteria of their interviews at any time. Students are encouraged to consult university websites and contact universities directly to confirm any information in this guide.

## 1.2 HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

There are a few essential steps to making effective use of this guide.

1. Read through the entire guide once
2. Re-read the entire guide and attempt all exercises contained within
3. Consult specific parts of the guide as needed

Notes:

- Complete all the exercises! It is all too easy to read them and dismiss them, but there is no learning to be made by doing this. All the exercises and guides in this document are important.
- Prepare and think about responses to ALL the questions outlined in this guide (time permitting). Questions that seem simple (for example, “tell us a bit about yourself”) are deceptively difficult when properly attempted.
- Interview technique is a combination of knowledge and skills. To ensure success at the skills of the interview, you will need to practice these skills on a regular and spaced basis. This is to ensure that all skills are internalised and habitual. As such, this guide should be revisited and reread on a regular basis.

### **1.3 WHAT ARE THE INTERVIEWERS LOOKING FOR?**

The interviewers are looking for a diverse range of things in candidates. There is no one criteria for an 'ideal medical student' – in fact, many medical schools desire a diverse range of students for the unique experiences and perspective each will bring to the program. There are a few common qualities that medical schools find desirable in applicants and they include:

#### **Intelligence**

While your academic results of Year 12 (or university) and the UMAT (or GAMSAT) exam will give the medical school an indication of your intelligence, the interview is an opportunity to showcase your ability to think on your feet, to articulate information and to apply your intelligence to novel situations.

#### **Critical, deep, perceptive and insightful thinking**

While performance in high school and many university exams is largely a reflection of a student's ability to acquire knowledge, this in itself is insufficient for the study of medicine. Good health professionals need to be able to think critically and solve problems. Diagnoses are often made on incomplete information – unclear, ambiguous or contradictory facts.

#### **Curiosity**

The profession of medicine is constantly and rapidly changing and requires a commitment to lifelong learning. It is imperative that you have disciplined study habits and enjoy learning.

#### **Motivation, dedication and commitment**

Practicing in the medical profession is not easy. The nature of the work often demands long hours and subjects health professionals to emotional and physical stress. In addition to this, doctors need to spend their whole lives keeping up with new practices, technology and theories.

#### **Compassion**

Compassion is a fundamental requisite to success as a health professional. The sincere desire to alleviate anguish in other humans is an important characteristic. Medical schools will value *evidence* of this in your responses.

#### **Communication skills**

One of the most frequent complaints from patients in regards to their doctors relates to their communication skills. It is postulated that most cases of medical litigation (where a patient sues a doctor) could have been with more effective communication. Indeed, communication skills are **MedStart: We get you into Medicine.** [www.MedStart.com.au](http://www.MedStart.com.au)



necessary to put a patient at ease, and elicit sensitive information that may be crucial for a speedy and accurate diagnosis.

Medical schools now recognise the importance of this attribute and screening for communication skills is a big reason why they now have interviews as an additional selection criteria.

### **Cooperation**

Medical professionals work in cooperation with a diverse range of colleagues and allied health professionals, and you are being interviewed to join an established group of medical students and doctors. In addition, studying medicine - especially with the new problem based learning focus - requires cooperation and teamwork. How well do you work in a team?

### **Cultural sensitivity**

Western countries such as Australia are blessed with a wide diversity of people of many cultural backgrounds and religions that may differ greatly from your own. Doctors need to be sensitive to these differences to demonstrate and inspire respect, instill confidence and motivate patients of all cultural backgrounds to make changes or undertake procedures that will lead to an improvement in health.

### **Maturity**

This is an important criterion, particularly for undergraduate universities where the average age of an applicant is between 17 and 18 years old. Universities recognise that at that age, many students do not know what medicine is really like as a profession, and harbour idealised views of medicine. Oftentimes students might be pursuing the career solely for monetary reward. This can lead to disappointment as the student progresses through a system that they have no real passion for.

Furthermore the nature of the work itself requires great maturity - sensitivity to the needs and privacy of others, confidence to interact with members of the public in illness and less than perfect moods, and the emotional resilience to be routinely exposed to pain, abuse and death.

Other important characteristics include:

- Self confidence
- Emotional sensitivity
- Emotional stability and resilience
- Performance under pressure
- Optimism, positivity, enthusiasm

## 2. TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

Interviews were implemented in an effort to assess the non-academic qualities of a candidate that are important for the practice of medicine.

It has been a challenge of medical schools to develop a format of interview that assesses these characteristics of a candidate in an accurate, fair and non-biased manner. As such, different medical schools adopt different formats of interviews, with a steady trend towards the Multistation Mini Interview (MMI) format in recent years.

### 2.1 INTERVIEW

In the past, medical schools conducted unstructured interviews. In unstructured interviews, interviewers are free to ask any question of any candidate with relatively few guidelines, and then make an assessment of the candidate based on the impression formed. This has been shown to have little reliability and predictive value and hence is no longer used in any Australian medical school.

### 2.2 STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

The structured interview involves panellists asking *all* candidates the *same* structured questions. There are very few if any follow up questions. These interviews are more 'fair' in the sense that everyone is asked the same questions, however there is no freedom to explore the individual strengths of candidates.

The standard characteristics of a structured interview is as follows:

1. 2-3 interviewers on the panel
2. Candidates are randomly assigned to a panel
3. Questions given to all candidates are identical
4. The interview is generally between 25 and 55 minutes long

Since every candidate is unique, and a range of different qualities make a good health professional, two other types of interviews are often employed.

## 2.3 SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

These interviews are 'semi' structured in that there are a set of questions that interviews are able to consult, however, interviewers are granted more flexibility to modify these set questions. They are able to ask specific follow up questions and ask questions that allow them to explore the individual strengths and characteristics of a candidate.

The standard characteristics of a semi-structured interview are as follows:

1. 2-3 interviewers on the panel
2. Candidates are randomly assigned to a panel
3. Interviewers have a guideline of standard questions but are free to ask additional and probing questions to explore the individual characteristics of each candidate.
4. The interview is generally between 25 and 55 minutes long

## 2.4 PROBLEMS WITH THE STRUCTURED AND SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEW FORMAT

Research has revealed that both structured and semi structured interviews are inherently invalid. While identical or largely similar questions are asked of each candidate in both styles of interview, a candidate's performance in an interview has been found to be largely based on the compatibility and quality of the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee on the day of the interview.

In addition, studies have determined that up to 56%<sup>1</sup> of the variability in performance in structured and semi structured interviews are due to interviewer variability.

This introduces an element of chance in structured and semi structured interviews where luck plays an excessive factor in the performance of a candidate, as results are influenced on which interview panel a candidate gets assigned to. The biases, expectations and perspectives of individual interviewers significantly influence interview ratings.

To gain reliable data on student performance, it was postulated that multiple assessors with multiple questions and scenarios were needed, and the MMI format was born.

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<sup>1</sup> Harasym PH, Woloschuk W, Mandin H, Brundin-Mather R, Reliability and Validity of interviewers judgements of medical school candidates. *Acad Med* 1996; 71: 40s-42s

## 2.5 MULTIPLE MINI INTERVIEW (MMI)

The MMI interview format was originally developed by the McMaster University School of Medicine in Canada and is being increasingly adopted by Medical faculties around the world. Research has demonstrated that the MMI format of interview is more accurate than traditional structured interviews in predicting the performance of medical students' in the Objective Structured Clinical Exams (OSCE) that students complete prior to internship.

The interview involves a series of short stations (usually between 8 and 10) – each of which contains a different interview panel member(s) – through which the candidates rotate. Within each station a candidate is asked one or more questions, sometimes based on scenarios and puzzles, or given an exercise to complete. Strict time limits are imposed, with each station lasting between 5 and 10 minutes.

Typically, candidates are given 2 minutes to read and comprehend a given scenario (usually posted on the door) prior to entering the interview room, where they are then given between 5-8 minutes to address the station. Note taking may or may not be allowed. The station may consist of:

- An interviewer asking standard interview questions, e.g. why do you want to study medicine. You will likely be asked traditional questions in at least two of the MMI stations, with one station focussing on your interest in medicine and another testing your critical and lateral thinking and ability to discuss ethical situations.
- An interviewer presenting hypothetical situations and scenarios
- An interviewer playing video content with the candidate asked to comment on what was witnessed
- Role plays where the interviewee is asked to play the role of a medical student or other person and respond to a scenario (often with actors playing roles of difficult patients, stressed mothers or others)
- Other stations with a diverse range of possible tasks such as completing mini aptitude quizzes.

Specific scenarios vary from medical school to medical school, depending on the attributes that the school has determined are important to test.

We can categorise the type of MMI station into two groups:

1. Formal interview stations – traditional question and answer stations
2. Practical interview stations – ones that require performance of a task

**Formal interview stations** can cover the following topics:

**Motivation, work experience, choice of medical school**

Covers questions regarding your reasons for studying medicine, demonstrated evidence that you wish to pursue medicine and your reasons for applying to the particular medical school.

**Knowledge and interest in medical-related issues**

Covers discussions around the current state of health care, the role of medicine in society, the role of the media in influencing the behaviour of patients and health care professionals, the history of medicine (e.g. what you would consider the most important medical advancement in the past 50 or 100 years), etc.

**Interpersonal skills and personality**

Covers questions related to your leadership skills and experiences, communication skills, and your ability to demonstrate empathy, deal with stress, criticism and conflict. You may be given a sensitive situation and asked how you will react, or to describe your strengths and weaknesses.

**Lateral thinking and creativity**

These questions test your ability to reason laterally and creatively. You may be asked questions such as whether doctors should be involved in the regulation of contact sports, to the advantages and disadvantages of paying for our own health care

**Ethics and dilemmas**

These questions centre around ethical issues such as animal testing, euthanasia, abortion, and more difficult scenarios such as whether it is right to give liver transplants to alcoholics or surgery to obese patients.

**Practical interview stations** can cover the following activities:

#### **Written task or questionnaire**

Candidates can be presented with questions that they need to answer in writing before the interview begins, such as 'why do you want to study medicine' and 'why do you wish to attend this medical school'. These questions are typically traditional interview questions and are designed to test a candidate's written skills in an environment where they cannot get external support.

#### **Discussion around a newspaper article**

Candidates are given an article and asked to answer questions based on issues raised. These usually cover ethical quandaries.

#### **Communication role play**

Candidates may be subject to a role play scenario designed to test their communication skills. Scenarios may include supporting a friend in need, breaking bad news to a friend, a family member or a neighbour, or explaining a task or procedure to another person (e.g. explaining to a distressed mother how to administer medication to her baby).

#### **Critique of a video doctor-patient consultation**

Candidates are shown a short video of a medical consultation, and asked to comment on various aspects of that consultation – for example how the GP communicated with that patient.

#### **Prioritisation exercise**

Candidates will be given a task or scenario that requires them to prioritise. For example, they may be given a list of items to take on holiday with them and told they cannot pack all of them. Candidates would then need to pick what to take and explain the reasoning behind what they choose and what they discard.

#### **Data analysis exercise**

Candidates are given a paper with information in the form of tables or graphs, and asked to answer questions and draw conclusions from the information given.

Following your initial answer to this question, the interviewer may provide you with new information or probe you with a follow up question, and may even disagree with your perspective. A large part of the interview score will be based on how well you handle this portion of the scenario. Remember to:

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1. Listen well
2. Ask for more information if needed
3. Be open to receiving new information
4. Approach the issue logically rather than jumping to conclusions
5. Offer reasons to substantiate your viewpoint
6. Respond to disagreement in a calm and appropriate manner

Remember that a good physician recognises his own limitations; do not be afraid of stating that you would seek the input of colleagues, medical ethics boards or other sources to help your decision-making.

Following this process, the interviewer takes the 2 minutes time period where the next candidate is outside reading the scenario to score the previous candidate.

#### *Advantages of the MMI format*

The advantages for objective assessment of candidates are numerous:

- As each question is asked by a single interviewer, all candidates are assessed by the same set of interviewers. This minimises variations in scores due to different interviewers.
- As each candidate is interviewed by up to 10 different interviewers, the effects of poor first impressions or non compatible personalities is minimised.
- Performance in one question/station is completely separate from performance in other stations

As such, the effects of chance and interview/situational bias are limited.

One disadvantage of the MMI for charismatic candidates is that it minimises the ability of the candidate to develop good rapport with the interviewers in the short time available. However, it is important not to discount the effects of positive first impressions that are made in the first seconds of the interaction.

The characteristics of an MMI interview are as follows:

1. Multiple stations
2. One (sometimes more) interviewers per station
3. Candidates are randomly assigned to their first station in the circuit and then move sequentially through the circuits.
4. Identical questions asked of each candidate

## **2.6 COMPOSITION OF THE INTERVIEW PANEL**

The composition of the interview panel will vary with each interview type and between universities.

Structured and semi-structured interviews are typically composed of one to three interviewers, generally consisting of a combination of the following:

1. A doctor
2. A member of academic staff
3. A community member

MMI interviews will have a range of members of the interview panel, in addition to student actors and other supplementary members who are present in certain stations.



### **3. HOW TO PREPARE**

There have been many instances of 'amazing' students with high grades failing miserably at their interview. Generally this reflects a student who is too lazy or too casual to put in the work necessary to prepare for interviews, or a student who simply does not know how to prepare. Interviewing is a skill, but not an easy skill to acquire. Like any skill, practice makes perfect.

Preparation for the interview does not merely involve formulating answers to common questions. A systematic approach combined with several general principles should be adopted for maximum preparation and results.

#### **3.1 STEPS IN PREPARATION**

##### **Gather relevant life experiences and skills**

The first stage in interview preparation is to gather life experiences that will:

1. Demonstrate your motivation and passion for the medical field (e.g. volunteering in a hospital)
2. Provide you with examples and anecdotes for answers (discussed later), and
3. Develop your maturity, social skills, communication skills and all other non-academic skills.

##### **Familiarise yourself with the style of questions and specific questions**

Knowing the styles of questions and the specific questions that you will be asked will allow you to formulate potent answers well in advance, rather than attempting to synthesise them on the spot in an interview. It will also increase your confidence by reducing the uncertainty surrounding the interview itself.

##### **Learn exactly what interviewers want to hear in the answers to these questions**

Every question is asked for a reason. It is important to understand the specific criteria interviewers are instructed to look for in each question in order to synthesise effective answers.

##### **Formulate your answers well in advance**

Formulating responses to common and important interview questions in advance is key to success in the interview. There is a specific process to follow when preparing responses so as you do not sound over rehearsed and maintain your flexibility when given new or unusual variants of questions. This will be discussed later in the guide.

##### **Learn to portray your best self and speak with confidence**

This is as important as the answers themselves, and in some ways even more important. Interviews are subjective by definition, and interviewers will naturally connect with a confident charismatic individual. They often look for this as a direct reflection of a student's communication skills – a vital skill in the field of medicine.

### **Practice!**

Responses and interview technique should be practiced to the point of internalisation, where you no longer have to think about it.

## **3.2 WHEN SHOULD I COMMENCE PREPARATION?**

The short answer to this question is: as soon as possible.

For students totally intent on studying medicine, preparation can begin months or even over a year in advance. This is for two reasons:

1. Just like the UMAT, interview preparation is skills based and not knowledge based. This means you cannot treat it like a high school exam and leave preparation to the last minute. It takes time to learn and internalise interview skills and prepared responses.
2. Volunteering or working in a healthcare setting can demonstrate to the interviewers your motivation and interest in the field. These opportunities take time to organise and complete and need to be done well in advance.

This does not mean that you need to complete comprehensive interview training and preparation extremely far in advance. Most successful students will undertake detailed interview training a few weeks or months before their interview, and then complete university specific preparation in the weeks before their interview.

Too many people leave their preparation to the few days before the interview, as there is always a subconscious hesitation in many individuals in preparing as they are confident in their ability to 'wing it' on the day. Whilst this can be done and amazing results can be achieved, oftentimes the best responses would have taken weeks to develop. Mind you, this is not weeks of constant work, but weeks of subconscious thought as to how you would answer the question and what anecdotes can be brought in. People who have not done this will often leave the interview thinking 'I WISH I had said this for that question'.

### **3.3 PREPARE, NOT REHEARSE**

*Prepare* for questions, do not *rehearse*. Preparing for questions in the context of an interview is different from rehearsing your answers.

Preparing for an answer involves knowing exactly what you want to say in the response, but not how exactly you are going to say it. This retains spontaneity and flexibility.

Rehearsing exactly what to say and how to say it is not as effective for three reasons:

#### **It is inflexible**

A slight variation in the wording of a question can entirely change the kind of answer that is required. If you have rehearsed the way you are going to deliver your response, you will regurgitate your rehearsed answer to this question which can make it seem like you did not listen, did not comprehend the question, or may reveal that you rehearsed your response.

#### **You may forget your response in high stress situations**

The interview is a high stress situation. If you have rehearsed a response and forget what is coming next partway through the response, you will become stressed, lose composure and provide a less than stellar response.

#### **It can look and feel fake**

When regurgitating rehearsed responses, candidates' minds are focussed on remembering the details of their answer and not completely present with the interviewer. This can prevent deep rapport and connection building from occurring.

#### **Psychologically does not encourage spontaneity**

If a completely novel question comes up and you have rehearsed significantly for all other questions for which you have provided an answer, there may be a huge difference in the quality of your response. This can seem incongruent and can throw you off your performance.

We will discuss the most effective way to prepare for responses later in the guide.

### 3.4 CONSTRUCT AN ONGOING ANSWER BOOK

If you are starting to think about interview preparation and your interview is more than a few days away, it is extremely beneficial to construct a book containing common and important interview questions, and ideas for topics and anecdotes to cover in their responses.

It is difficult to sit down and synthesise answers full of depth in one sitting. Rather, keeping a book with answers in progress allows your subconscious mind to formulate better answers and anecdotes. By the time you commence your detailed interview preparation, this book will be full of examples and anecdotes to a depth that would have been difficult to synthesise in the days before the interview.

Steps to keeping this answer book are as follows:

1. Fill in an exercise book with every single practice interview question you can find, leaving a gap between the questions.
2. Write (in point form) the points and anecdotes and examples you would want to discuss in your response to the question
3. Continue filling in responses and examples as you go through your day to day life and thoughts arise.

Note that you must do this for *all questions*, even ones that seem easy enough to answer. Questions like 'who are you?' are deceptively difficult to answer, but seem simple enough when considered superficially.

### 3.5 CULTIVATE POSITIVE QUALITIES IN YOURSELF AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE

From now until your interviews, it would be beneficial to make an active effort to cultivate positive qualities in yourself as much as possible.

Are you an honest person? Are you friendly? Are you open and warm? These qualities may not be good for every single aspect of life but are certainly valued in medicine. Your genuine personality will always shine through to some degree in the interview, with the millions of tiny body language cues that you are giving off at a constant bases. This is very hard to fake. Do whatever it takes to get into the state of your best self prior to the interview.

### 3.6 RESEARCH THE MEDICAL SCHOOL

In addition to formulating responses to common and important questions, it is important to thoroughly research the medical schools to which you will be applying to. Not only will this allow you to address the common interview question of 'why our medical school?' but will also allow you to ask intelligent questions about the school at the end of the interview. Having a well informed conversation

about the merits of a school with the interviewer can demonstrate in a powerful way your motivation and dedication.

Information can be gathered from several places:

- The website of the medical faculty
- Promotional material
- Websites of the affiliated hospitals of the schools
- Residents and physicians who have trained at the school
- Current medical students at the school

Using this information, learn the following information about each of the medical schools:

1. Its course structure. What areas does it focus on?
2. Important course themes. Each university has a focus on a different area. For example, James Cook University has a tropical, indigenous and rural medicine focus.
3. Its associated hospitals.
4. Research conducted by the university.
5. History, reputation, location and size.

Focus on the question ‘what makes this school unique and great’ throughout your research to direct your attention.

*Find out what type of student the medical school seeks*

Sometimes medical schools specify the qualities that they wish to find in a medical student. Aside from the generic ones such as intellectual ability, communication skills and things like that, you may be able to unearth more specific criteria and tailor your responses to fit.

For example, the University of Western Sydney prefers students who are interested in working in areas of workforce need (particularly in the Greater Western Sydney area) – in this interview it may be best to tailor anecdotes and examples highlighting any experiences relevant to this.

### **3.7 COMPLETE A MOCK INTERVIEW**

This is an often overlooked component of interview training that is extremely beneficial when undertaken.

Too many students neglect to complete a mock interview to their detriment. There is a difference between intellectually knowing what you would like to say for particular questions that come up, and actually being able to deliver these answers on the spot in response to variations of the questions, as well as delivering completely new and unexpected questions.

The issue with merely preparing responses without practicing them in simulated conditions is twofold:

1. Non verbal interview techniques which are equally as important as the content of the responses are never practiced or developed.
2. Responses themselves are never fully internalised, and by memorising them without perfecting the delivery there is a higher risk of sounding rehearsed.

Some students decide to verbalise responses as a substitute for sitting a mock interview. While this is more beneficial than doing nothing, it is not as useful as completing a full mock interview as you lack the feedback that is necessary to change and improve. Remember, practice does not make perfect – practice makes permanent. You do not want to make your bad habits permanent.

Students are often overly confident about their ability to convey their strengths, characteristics, fit for the school and their communication skills in one short interview slot. This is a difficult task, and requires well prepared responses in conjunction with a good delivery to impress the interviewer.

In addition to this, synthesising answers on the fly is a skill and will not be developed without sufficient practice.

Practicing also pinpoints subtle deficiencies in your interview technique. You might not notice mannerisms – such as your tendency to tap your foot – but the interviewer may find it annoying. Nervous habits, childish mannerisms, poor grammar or inappropriate vocal volume and tonality are things that are not so easily recognised in yourself, but can easily be recognised by another person in a mock interview situation.

Mock interviews are more beneficial than merely vocalising responses to question as they are more realistic, offer a level of uncertainty (you are not sure what questions are going to be asked), they provide direct feedback (best from a skilled observer) and can reveal where you are not adequately prepared.

Three stages of mock interviewing:

1. Complete a mock interview in front of a mirror. This will help identify some visual habits or deficiencies. Do you smile enough? Are your arms uncrossed and open?
2. Record yourself completing a mock interview and play it back. This is *immensely* beneficial. You will be able to pick up on both visual and auditory habits and deficiencies, with the added advantage that you can repeat and re-watch sections that you have flagged.
3. Practice with another individual. Have them ask you questions and respond like a real interview. Be careful about who you pick for this – friends and family may not have the right expertise and might be hesitant on critiquing you.

Look for the following things when completing a mock interview:

1. Content of responses
2. Body language
3. Mannerisms and habits
4. Warmth

Further, practicing will lead to familiarity, reducing nervousness and thus increasing performance.

### **3.8 HOW TO CONDUCT YOUR OWN MOCK INTERVIEW**

If you are unable to find anyone who can help you conduct a mock interview, you are able to conduct one by yourself. Doing this is still extremely useful. To do so, follow these steps:

1. Set up a table in front of a mirror, and sit facing the mirror
2. Set up a voice recorder (or better still a video recorder) to record your performance
3. Have a clock or timer clearly visible so you can stick to guideline times
4. Compile a random list of interview questions, and assume the role of the interviewer and the candidate
  - a. As the interviewer, ask yourself the question (this is mostly useful for the voice recording so you know which question you are responding to)
  - b. As the candidate, respond while watching yourself in the mirror in exactly the manner you would in real interview situations.
5. After completing the trial interview, replay the entire thing and deconstruct errors relating to interview techniques, responses, etc.

To conduct an MMI interview, replace step 4 with the following:

4. Write out each scenario on a separate sheet of paper and leave these outside your room
  - a. Read one scenario for two minutes before entering the room and sitting down – ensure you still practice greeting the imaginary interviewer!
  - b. Answer the question while sticking to the time limits
  - c. Leave the room and repeat the process.

### **3.9 ADEQUATELY BALANCE PREPARATION AND PRACTICE**

Some students spent the vast majority of their time on preparing model responses and spend very little or no time in practicing under mock interview conditions. This is akin to someone who tries to learn how to play tennis by reading a book on tennis. Interviews preparation does involve some acquisition of knowledge, but largely involves the acquisition of skills. Ensure you leave adequate time for preparation.

On the flipside, some students are tempted to undertake mock interviews or practice answering questions with little to no preparation of knowledge and skills. This can be counterproductive – practicing under pressure without preparation can lead to nervousness and panic.

It is important to adequately balance practice and preparation. The amount of time that should be invested to each varies from person to person – individuals who are naturally more charismatic and personable might want to invest more time into ensuring their answers are high quality, whereas more introspective individuals may know and be able to articulate themselves to a higher degree and thus might benefit in more practical practice of interview technique.

### **3.10 KNOW EVERY ELEMENT OF YOUR WRITTEN APPLICATION**

Some medical schools require a written application to be submitted. Whether they form part of the formal selection criteria (e.g. James Cook University) or not (e.g. The University of New South Wales), the interviewers may have read the application prior to interviewing you. Most of the time, students have completed and submitted this application well before they start formally preparing for interviews.

You must know every single element of your application prior to sitting the formal interview. You must prepare and provide responses to interview questions that are in line with the written application. You must know all the details of any listed work or volunteering events with some example anecdotes to demonstrate the type of experiences you had there.

If the interviewer senses that your responses are not completely congruous with what was in the written application, he will at a conscious or subconscious level sense dishonesty and lose trust. From here, it is very hard to leave a favourable impression on the interviewer.



### **3.11 ANTICIPATE AND ADDRESS ANY ‘WEAKNESSES’ IN YOUR APPLICATION**

Some students may have obvious weaknesses in their applications or life experiences. Some of these may include (but are not limited to):

- Extended gaps in education (for example multiple consecutive gap years that were not put to productive use)
- Completely non-relevant work experience (e.g. if all your work experience has been in law firms due to a previous interest)
- Answers that do not demonstrate adequate passion and motivation

A weakness in your application might be brought up by your interviewer, but this is not likely to occur explicitly. It is thus up to you to smoothly address the weakness during the course of the interview.

In order to address a weakness, take the following steps:

1. Address it in a matter-of-fact way
2. Discuss the reasons for the weakness
3. Do not make excuses, complaints or blame others for the weakness
4. Explain how you have grown and learned from the experience

As an example, the written application for James Cook University explicitly asks ‘Tell us why you’re interested in enrolling for a course where important themes are rural, remote, indigenous and tropical health and medicine?’ Many students have written generic responses to these questions that don’t demonstrate a true passion for these fields. Many students would also lack relevant work experience or volunteering to back this up. In the interview, as an example it might be good to pre-emptively mention your interest and express your regret that you haven’t had the time to volunteer in a rural area, or similar.

### **3.12 VOLUNTEER OR GAIN RELEVANT WORK EXPERIENCE**

This can really assist in your interview for several reasons. Firstly, by volunteering or undertaking relevant work experience in a healthcare setting, you are demonstrating your motivation to pursue medicine and your commitment to service. Secondly, you will be gathering experiences from which you can draw relevant anecdotes for answers. Finally, you will be growing as an individual – increasing your communication skills, maturity and a wealth of other personal characteristics that shine through in your every day behaviour and your interview.

See sections 7.3 and 7.4 for an explanation of why relevant work experience is important in the selection criteria of interview candidates.

## 4. INTERVIEW TECHNIQUES

Interview preparation is not just about preparing the answers you give. Body language, demeanour, humility and other aspects of your interview technique are just as important as the content of your answer.

Indeed, preparing for an interview does not mean learning answers to all possible questions – there are far too many possible questions for this to be realistic. Ready made answers, if delivered inappropriately can also lead to a candidate sounding rehearsed which is a large detractor from interview performance.

This section will cover important techniques that need to be applied to all interview questions. You will want to integrate these techniques throughout all of your answers, and you will want to practice these techniques to the level that they become automatic and habitual.

### 4.1 THE INTERVIEW IS A PLACE WHERE YOU SHOW THEM WHO YOU ARE

Throughout the course of your interview preparation and in the interview itself, keep the following mantra in mind:

*The interview is not a place where they find out about you. The interview is a place where you SHOW them who you are.*

There is a huge difference here. Although the interviewers are the ones asking you the questions, generally speaking, they will be asking all the students the same or largely similar generic questions.

As such, it is up to you to SHOW them who you are, and why you are the ideal candidate for selection. You are not the only person they are interviewing, and interviewers will both consciously and subconsciously be comparing your responses with past and future candidates.

### 4.2 INTERVIEWS ARE SUBJECTIVE BY DEFINITION

It is important to realise that interviews are subjective by definition. Most students incorrectly assume that the content of your answer is the only thing interviewers are looking for; it is certainly important, but not everything.

The 'halo effect' is a well known phenomenon, where judgements on an individual's overall character influence how we feel about more specific traits.

Interviewers are humans, and human nature dictates that when we like someone, we subconsciously view what they say in a more positive light. The opposite is also true.

For this reason, it is worthwhile investing a large proportion of time improving your non verbal interview skills that will build trust and rapport with the interviewer.

### **4.3 COMMUNICATION SKILLS ARE VITAL, AND THE INTERVIEW IS WHERE THEY ARE ASSESSED**

One of the main reasons that interviews have been implemented are to flag and remove students who are academically talented and look great on paper but have not developed the communication or people skills that are so vital to the practice of medicine.

Candidates who cannot establish effective rapport, fail to listen, jump to improper conclusions, are too shy or too dominant will not fare well in interviews because this behaviour undermines teams.

In other words, interviews are subjective by definition and *rightly so*.

Communication is *vital* in the field of medicine. Every step of treatment of a patient – from listening to the patient's story, building trust and comfort, asking insightful questions to elicit needed information, explaining complex diagnoses, communicating an effective treatment plan, and interacting with allied health professionals – is underpinned by effective communication skills.

### **4.4 IMPROVE YOUR LIKEABILITY**

Keeping in mind that interviews are subjective by definition, it makes sense to directly work on your likeability in the lead up to the interview and in the interview itself. Whilst some individuals think that this is an innate and unchangeable aspect of one's personality, likeability and charisma are really a set of learned skills that can be acquired by anyone.

As a simple exercise, imagine you have to spend half an hour in a room with ten strangers. At the end of this time, you will naturally like 1 or 2 of them better than others. What is it about them that made you like them? Did they listen well, did they smile and seem genuinely happy? Think about these things and make some simple applications to your own personality.

## **4.5 BOASTING, ARROGANCE AND HOW TO AVOID IT**

Many candidates are worried or hesitant about talking themselves up in an interview setting as they believe it might sound arrogant and boastful. While it is true that you do not want to convey even a hint of arrogance to the interviewers, there are a few key steps students can take to avoid sounding arrogant whilst simultaneously conveying why they are the most suitable fit for the medical profession.

To avoid arrogance when talking yourself up, follow these principles:

### **Be genuinely humble**

When speaking of a great achievement, it is good to be genuinely humble about it. This can be achieved by ensuring you credit all those that helped you achieve your success, and explain the lucky circumstances that also would have contributed.

For example, a candidate who is very academically strong might mention that he feels very lucky to have had a stable home environment and are grateful to their parents for teaching them the value of education and supporting them throughout high school.

**Never say anything derogatory about other people, other personalities or other institutions – even if it is true.**

This can be overt and can also be extremely subtle.

For example, a student might state ‘a lot of my friends have been pushed into medicine by their parents, but I am doing medicine for myself’. This statement can be interpreted as conceited and boastful at some subconscious level.

A better response would be something as follows: ‘I know some of my friends have parents who really want the best for them and encouraged them to study medicine. My parents were not so loving, so it was up to me to really find out what I had a passion for...’ Note the well placed self deprecating humour ‘my parents were not so loving’, note that the word ‘some’ and the positive framing ‘parents who really want the best for them’. The second statement conveys the same information to the interviewer as the first but without a hint of arrogance.

### **Convey that you have grown and are still growing**

When you are answering a question about your skills or achievements, always convey that you are still growing and improving, and highlight where you have come from.

For example, if you are asked 'are you a good leader?' some people may answer 'yes I believe I am a very good leader, I am able to delegate effectively, and am actively involved in the team... '.

Another way of answering the question would be to say 'well if you asked me 5 years ago, I would say no, but I have been fortunate enough to be involved in (insert leadership roles here) over the past few years and I can see that it has really forced me to step up as a leader. I have definitely improved in my ability to ..... and feel quite confident in my skills, which I find quite a privilege'

#### **4.6 SPONTANEITY**

We mentioned above that you must *prepare* for questions, not *rehearse* for them. This is because you do not want to convey to the interviewer that you have rehearsed a response to the question that is asked. A well prepared response to a question can fool the interviewers into thinking you are someone who you are actually not, so they are wary of prepared responses, and may not give you the benefit of the doubt.

Conversely, if you manage to convince the interviewers that you are synthesising genuine answers on the spot (regardless of the fact that you have spent weeks preparing these responses) this can be very powerful.

You do this by being spontaneous and flexible. This involves, but is not limited to, two techniques

1. **Thinking time** - Always take a couple of seconds to think of your answer, or at least pretend to if you have rehearsed it. The best thing you can do during this time is to put a logical coherent flow and structure to your thoughts, and determine whether you can bring in any anecdotes. If you launch straight into an answer, and deliver it flawlessly which can often be done with over rehearsed answers, the examiner may feel disconnected and may feel that response has been rehearsed
2. **Self correction** - This should not be overused, but is a powerful technique to convey spontaneity. If you listen to someone recounting a genuine event, you will see that they often correct themselves as they remember new information unless they are a naturally skilled storyteller. If someone is lying, they will tend not to go back and self correct anything. Similarly, if someone has rehearsed an answer, it will be structured and can be delivered flawlessly. You might want to introduce self correction occasionally to convey to the interviewers that you are thinking of answers on the spot and they are genuine. Do not overdo this, as it can lead to your thoughts seeming unstructured and erratic.

## **4.7 FIRST IMPRESSIONS**

First impressions are important and DO count. We will talk about exactly how to make a strong first impression in the section titled 'on the day'.

Some form of a conclusion is made about an interview applicant in the first thirty seconds of an encounter, and after that point for the remainder of the interview, the interviewer will subconsciously discount evidence that does not fit in with this predetermined image of the candidate.

It can be extremely difficult to overcome a negative first impression for this reason, but also highlights how a good first impression can give disproportional rewards.

## **4.8 HUMILITY AND SELF DEPRECATION**

Don't go overboard with this, but a few well placed comments can work wonders. It shows them you are not arrogant or egocentric and shows them that you are most likely humble and honest with yourself.

## **4.9 HUMOUR**

Don't be afraid to joke! But not too much, and do not be goofy. Humour can be very powerful, as it conveys comfort, confidence, and it can make you more likable.

## **4.10 DO NOT ASK CLARIFICATION QUESTIONS UNLESS COMPLETELY NECESSARY**

In general, you should NOT ask clarification questions in response to a question the interviewer has posed to you.

Interviewers are generally just script readers and probably cannot provide additional information beyond the wording of the question itself.

It can also show immense depth and intelligence if you do not ask for clarification and take your own interpretation of their question. Some questions are left deliberately open ended to interpretation.

## **4.11 PRACTICE VERBAL TECHNIQUES**

There are a few verbal techniques that need to be developed and internalised so that they come naturally to you in the interview.

### **Speak intelligently**

Remember that the interview panel is composed of older more mature individuals. Humans naturally like people who are more similar to them, and it is best to avoid slang, swearing and teenage colloquialisms to ensure you do not convey immaturity.

Further, you can convey a disproportionate amount of intelligence simply through your choice of vocabulary and speaking style.

**Define all school related terms**

Keep in mind that your interviewers are typically in their middle ages, and may not be familiar with current school initiatives such as 'cadets', 'SRC' and other positions you might have held in school. Ensure that you briefly describe these roles when discussing them.

**Avoid negative language**

In your preparation for interviews, spend some time eliminating 'negative' words from your vocabulary. Language and word choice is powerful, and using negative words such as hate, worst and terrible subconsciously instils a negative impression in the mind of the interviewer (and indeed, humans in general).

This is true even if you are using the negative word in a positive context, for example 'I never hate people'.

**Don't use phrases that undermine credibility**

A big safeguard for interviewers is to guard against applicants whose achievements are exaggerated or untrue. Certain phrases can subconsciously undermine the credibility of your other answers. Avoid phrases like the following:

- To tell you the truth...
- To be honest....
- Don't quote me on that... (unless used in humour)

Prefacing your statements with the above can sensitise an interviewer at a conscious or subconscious level to the possibility that the coming response or previous responses have been anything less than truthful.

**Don't complain**

Avoid complaining at any point in your interview – about small and big things. When the interviewer asks how you are at the start of the interview, do not tell them how parking was a nightmare, how your alarm didn't go off, how your friends were stressing you out – even if it is true. Although you might think it serves as a disclaimer for your subsequent performance, complaining to a stranger naturally leaves a negative impression.

Furthermore, never be led into a situation where you criticise or complain another institution or individual. For example, the interviewer may ask you ‘what was the most challenging aspect of high school’. For you, this may have been one of your peers, one of your teachers, or the lack of school resources. Instead of talking about these, keep the focus on your motivations and accomplishments and emphasise the learning and growth you gained from the challenging experience.

**Avoid expressing negative traits**

It can be surprisingly easy to display negative traits in the context of a high pressure interview situation. For example:

- “I’m sorry I know that wasn’t the best answer” (apologetic)
- “I wish I had done better in high school even though my results were decent” (self critical)

Avoid speaking in a way that suggest negative traits, including:

- Apologetic
- Self critical
- Argumentative
- Easily angered
- Impatient
- Hurried
- Overly excitable
- Uninhibited
- Meek
- Blunt
- Etc.

**Speak with the correct tone and volume**

Speak with an engaged, friendly and enthusiastic tone. Convey your passion in your answers – this impacts the interviewers at a visceral subconscious level.

Ensure your volume is appropriate – too loud and you might sound dominant and arrogant, too soft and you can irritate interviewers who struggle to hear you and convey a lack of confidence.



Applicants are more likely to be overly quiet than overly loud. This will raise concerns in the interviewer, such as whether you are strong enough for medical school, whether patients or physicians will intimidate you, or whether perhaps there is something to hide. Ensure your volume is adequate.

**Avoid 'uhm-ing' and 'ahh-ing'**

Humans are naturally inclined to fill gaps in the conversation with these 'fillers' – as silence is uncomfortable. However, these fillers also detract from the interviewers perception of your intelligence and confidence.

It is difficult to reverse this unconscious habit, and you do not want to concentrate on this during the interview itself. Rather, in the lead up to the interview, make every active effort to recognise and eliminate these from your vocabulary.

**Use socially intelligent pauses**

Using your judgment and reading the body language of the interviewers, it is often important to pause at certain times. For example, pausing slightly before elaborating will allow the interviewers a chance to cut you off (you will know that you should do this if they look like they want to finish up or move on). You need to use your judgement for this, as you don't want it to seem like they are always prompting you to elaborate, but rather that you have depth to your answers. Often they wont interrupt. Interviewers might also deliberately look bored just to test your reaction.

**4.12 PRACTICE NON VERBAL TECHNIQUES (BODY LANGUAGE)**

It is estimated that 65-90% of communication in face to face interactions is non-verbal. Non verbal communication is as important or in some cases more important than verbal communication.

The most important aspect of this non-verbal communication is body language. Body language can overwhelm the content of your answers particularly if it conveys uncertainty or a lack of conviction. A student may have a self professed passion and dedication for medicine, but if they are slouched on the chair, looking nervous or bored, then red flags will be raised at a subconscious and conscious level at this incongruity.

In some cases it is difficult or impossible to evaluate your own body language – sitting a mock interview is hugely beneficial in this regard.

## Open body language

Aim to keep your body language open as this conveys warmth, openness and honesty:

- Smile! This might require practice, but it is one of the most important things you need to do to convey warmth and friendliness
- Keep gestures open, energetic and expressive
- Sit with your back straight and lean forward slightly to convey engagement
  - Avoid leaning back as this can convey too much comfort at best and arrogance at worst
- Keep legs and arms uncrossed

Remember that you don't want to have to concentrate on this – if this style of body language does not come naturally to you, practice it enough so that it becomes second nature.

## Hands

This is a topic that many students always get confused about – “What do I do with my hands!” And we think this is a valid concern. There are a couple of things that you should keep in mind:

- Interviewee chairs most likely will not have armrests.
- Many universities do not have a table between you and the interviewer – so they can see your entire body position.
- Placing your arms on your knees/thighs can be very awkward – we suggest folding your hands in your lap. Often, one hand lightly grasps the other or as some students have done in the past, touching fingertips lightly. Practice some of these subtle yet comfortable positions in front of the mirror at home to find what feels best for you.

The aim is to appear “open” yet relaxed and poised. Notice a recurring theme here? Occasional hand gestures to supplement your voice are perfectly fine; however, try not to overdo it. Again, try not to fidget or flail your arms about when making a point.

## Eye contact

Eye contact is extremely important. This is an issue for many introverted people, so it is definitely something you should practice in the lead up to the interview if it is not second nature to you.

Since there will be more than one interviewer at most universities, you need to look at them all – even though usually only one asks all of the questions. All interviewers will be deliberating your suitability

and providing judgements post interview, so it is your job to establish rapport with all of them. We recommend that you divide the time you look at each interviewer as you respond to their questions in a 60:40 ratio where you focus more on the interviewer that asked the question. If there are three interviewers, 50:25:25 is adequate. There is *no hard and fast rule*, but you must always recognize the presence of the other interviewers.

Do not quickly dart eyes from one interviewer to another. Make eye contact and sustain it for at least a few seconds before moving to the other interviewer. While you are concluding your response, make eye contact with the interviewer who asked the question.

You must give eye contact to the other interviewers to keep them engaged at a subconscious level. This is true *even if they are not actively engaging with you*. This might be a deliberate ploy to see how you handle the situation (and even if it isn't, it is still comforting to assume it is!). Don't be alarmed, continue without dampening the emotion and enthusiasm in your response.

#### **Avoid non-verbal distractors**

Avoid nervous and distracting habits and tendencies. These may include but are not limited to:

- Twirling hair
- Tapping foot
- Drumming fingers
- Fiddling
- Glancing at the clock excessively

It may be difficult to identify them, particularly those that come out during times of stress. Again, a mock interview is one of the best ways to identify any tendency.

### **4.13 ENERGY!**

One of the biggest reasons for a low interview score is a candidate who does not appear actively interested, a candidate that has no spark.

Regardless of the content of your answers, the manner in which it is conveyed influences its reception greatly.

Avoid stiffening up, becoming too formal, focusing on your anxiety, fatigue and next or past answers to an extent that you fail to be high energy and communicate a deep enthusiasm for medicine and the medical school.

*Smile, make good eye contact and be engaging, interesting and warm.* Do not be swayed by a negative interviewer and greet them happily and warmly. Have a personality that shines.

#### **4.14 PLAN WHAT YOU WILL DO WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW AN ANSWER**

There is often a time in anyone's interview where they are asked a question that they do not know how to answer. While preparation and practice are the best defence to this, this can still occur no matter how much preparation has been undertaken.

It is important to not only plan what you will do if this occurs, but to *expect that it will occur* – this will reduce stress and panic in the moment. Keep the following principles in mind:

7. One subpar response is unlikely to destroy your entire interview performance
7. Do not rush, stammer or apologise
7. Pause for a few seconds to gather your thoughts. You may want to state something along the lines of 'that question is interesting, let me think for a moment'
7. With many questions there are no right or wrong answers, and it might be best to simply state 'I don't know how to answer that question'. This can take a great deal of confidence and may even bolster the interviewer's impression of you.
7. Maintain your focus and composure for the next question
7. If you find an answer by the end of the interview, you may have a chance to volunteer it – 'I've been thinking about one of the questions from earlier, would you mind if I expanded on my initial answer?'

#### **4.15 HANDLE SILENCE**

Silence is uncomfortable, particularly as a nervous candidate. You must prepare for silence in an interview situation, as it is quite common.

This is sometimes done deliberately, where an interviewer may simply stare at you after you have concluded your question. When this occurs, many students wonder if they said something wrong, and sometimes nervously change their whole answer. This tactic is deliberately employed by interviewers to test an applicant's confidence in their response.

The correct way to deal with silence is to remain comfortable in it, without fidgeting or appearing anxious. Look at the interviewer with interest, keep your mind blank instead of racing, and the next question will eventually come.

## **4.16 MULTISTATION MINI INTERVIEW (MMI) SPECIFIC TECHNIQUES**

There are a few additional pointers and techniques that must be adopted during and in preparation for multiple mini interviews.

### **1. Prepare to handle follow up questions or disagreements**

A portion of the MMI stations are based on scenarios and hypothetical situations to which you will have to provide a perspective or solution.

Following your initial answer, the interviewer may probe you with follow up questions or disagree with your perspective. This can be confronting but it is important to remember that this is often a deliberate action and a large part of your score for the station will come from how you handle this.

When confronted with this, ensure you:

- Listen well
- Ask for more information if needed
- Be open to receiving the new information
- Do not jump to conclusions
- Approach the issue logically
- Offer reasons to substantiate or defend your viewpoint
- Respond in a calm, mature and non personal manner to disagreement

### **2. Understand your limitations**

Some scenarios will require you to provide advice to patient actors. It is important to recognise your own limitations – this is a mark of a good physician. If needed, ensure that you state you will seek additional information from colleagues, medical ethics boards and other sources to help you reach a decision.

### **3. Keep your performance at each station independent**

The beauty of the MMI format is that your performance at one station does not impact your performance at another station. Do not let a poor performance in one station affect your performance in subsequent stations.

### **4. Document everything following your interview**

Document your experiences, including scenarios that were encountered. This can be used to improve your own performance for future interviews.

## **5. HOW TO ANSWER QUESTIONS**

In addition to overarching interview techniques, there are specific techniques on responding to questions in an effective manner.

Practice and internalise these principles, and keep them in mind when formulating your prepared responses.

### **5.1 STEPS TO ANSWERING QUESTIONS**

There are no set rules in regards to this, so this is the method we advise for most questions.

#### **Think**

Pause for a few seconds before answering each question to gather and structure your thoughts, as well as to convey the impression that you are synthesising answers on the spot.

#### **Answer the question**

Ensure you directly answer the question that was stated, prior to elaborating on your response.

#### **Bring in an anecdote or example, if possible.**

Remember this must look natural and not forced – you will need to calibrate yourself on this. It might seem a little forced/distracted to bring in anecdotes for every single question.

#### **Conclude your answer**

Interviewers will rarely if ever, interrupt. Make sure there is a clear and definitive conclusion to your response. If the interview sits in silence after your response, remember that this may be a deliberate ploy and to stay comfortable with your answer.

## **5.2 THE POWER OF ANECDOTES**

Anecdotes that highlight your experiences, demonstrate your positive characteristics, engage the interviewer and build rapport are the closest thing you can get to a magic pill interview technique.

They are powerful for 4 reasons:

### **They show the interviewer you have done extra curricular activities**

Interviewers will rarely ask 'what extracurricular activities have you done?'. It is up to you to demonstrate your motivation and passion for medicine, as well as your diverse range of experiences, by integrating them into your responses

### **They engage the interviewer and build rapport**

Remember that interviews are subjective by definition, and if the interviewer likes you he will view all your responses in a more positive light. Humans naturally engage with stories and anecdotes, and sharing them with the interviewer allows him to connect with you on a more real and personal level.

### **They add credibility to your responses**

Anyone can make grand claims about how they are an excellent and powerful leader. Substantiating this with an example adds credibility.

### **They allow you to stand out and be remembered**

The interviewer is not likely to remember a candidate who gives the same generic 'correct' responses to all the interview questions. By integrating anecdotes and unique experiences, you give the interview more points of reference to remember you above other applicants, which can make a powerful impact on your interview score.

Try and make these anecdotes non academic. They already know that you have to be an academically successful person to be offered an interview. Also try and keep these anecdotes from recent experiences (last few years).

## **5.3 LISTEN!**

This is a separate point very deliberately. Never interrupt the interviewer and always place 100% of your focus and attention on them while speaking. This will be covered more in depth in the section 'on the day'.

## **5.4 EXPRESSING AN OPINION**

Sometimes interviewers will ask questions that ask for your opinion on a particular topic or issue. For these questions, students often get caught up trying to work out the 'correct' opinion, or the one that the interviewers would most likely want to hear.

These questions are not designed for this purpose, but instead are designed to test your ability to think about a topic from different perspectives. As such, when presented with a question requiring an opinion, ensure you present arguments on both sides of the debate before giving your own opinion.



## 6. SELECTION CRITERIA

Prior to formulating your prepared answers, it is important to define exactly what interviewers are looking for when interviewing candidates. What are the selection criteria that are used to make decisions on which applicants to accept?

Understanding these selection criteria should form the basis of formulating your prepared responses.

### 6.1 GENERAL GOAL OF INTERVIEWS

It is once again pertinent to keep in mind the general goal of the interview.

*The purpose of the interview is to determine whether you have the non-academic attributes to succeed in medical school and clinical practice.*

The interviewers are essentially trying to determine whether you are a good fit for the medical profession. They are aware that once a medical school admits a candidate, barring a grievous mistake, the candidate will become a doctor – by allowing you to pass the interview they are bestowing the candidate with the opportunity to participate in the field of healthcare at the highest level. They have a 30 minutes to 2 hours snapshot of who you are in order to determine whether you are likely kind, moral, not a liar or thief, dependable and smart, and can handle the physical and emotional demands of medicine. They are trying to determine whether one day they would feel comfortable letting you provide care for them or their sick relative. Keep this in the back of your mind throughout your interview preparation.

### 6.2 PERSONAL QUALITIES TO CONVEY

There are a wealth of personal qualities that are desired in applicants. The following list summarises personal qualities that should be conveyed in your responses and demeanour in the interview. This list is in no particular order.

- Ability to work effectively in a team
- Honesty
- Problem solving and critical thinking skills
- Stress management
- Altruism and commitment to serve others
- Energy and enthusiasm
- Positive attitude
- Flexibility
- Good time management

- Confidence
- Personal insights - recognition of ones strengths and limits and willingness to admit error
- Perseverance and persistence
- Initiative
- Curiosity
- Intelligence
- Maturity
- Motivation for medicine
- Communication skills
- Conscientiousness
- Leadership ability
- Listening skills
- Respect for others

Keep in mind that you do not need to express *every single one of these things*. All you need to do is to express the most important ones well.

The rest of this section will focus on the most important attributes that form the interview selection criteria. These include:

1. Motivation for a medical career
2. Compassion and empathy
3. Personal maturity
4. Integrity and honesty
5. Interpersonal skills
6. Leadership and teamwork
7. Your fit with the medical school

It is important to note that certain characteristics, such as logical reasoning ability, are valued by universities but not highly sought after in the context of an interview.

### 6.3 MOTIVATION FOR A MEDICAL CAREER

Interviewers are trying to assess first and foremost your motivation to pursue a career in medicine. The customary “Why do you want to study Medicine” will not always be asked in exactly these words. However, you can be rest assured that the interviewer is very interested in this answer – they seek your *motivation*.

Medical schools value direct exposure to medicine. It is best to demonstrate motivation, not just espouse it – if you want to ‘help people’ and have no direct exposure to medicine, how do you know you do not want to become a teacher or social worker instead? Interviewers want to know that you understand what you are getting yourself into.

To help you persuade them of your dying wish to study Medicine, it is always good to mention any experiences you’ve had in healthcare. You can talk about the breadth and depth of those experiences and how it has influenced you (what did you learn from those experiences?). It would help greatly to have undertaken some *work experience* at a hospital or clinic! It is also good to think about what initially influenced you to pursue the path of a medical practitioner.

### 6.4 COMPASSION AND EMPATHY

Compassion and empathy are naturally important qualities of a health care professional and are as such highly valued in interview candidates. This encompasses your:

- Ability to build rapport, listen and influence
- Capacity to adopt another’s perspective
- Capacity to communicate sensitively with others
- Ability to explain ideas and concepts to different audiences
- Ability to change your language depending on the situation

In the same way as having a *demonstrated* motivation to pursue medicine is beneficial, medical schools value a demonstrated commitment to service. Participating in community service and telling the interviewer about meaningful experiences from these activities can provide direct evidence of concern or compassion for others.

Ensure that you relate meaningful experiences from the activities to demonstrate that your interest in service was sincere and not just completed to secure a place in medical school.

## **6.5 PERSONAL MATURITY, RESILIENCE AND ABILITY TO COPE WITH PRESSURE**

Medical training is physically and emotionally demanding, and requires a high level of personal maturity. Interviewers seek evidence of this trait through both your answers and your experiences.

This is especially the case with undergraduate medical interviews, where applicants are often coming straight from high school and have not had any 'real' life experience.

Aim to demonstrate throughout your responses and your interview the following:

- Your ability to cope with stress, and examples of this
- Your ability to overcome obstacles, and examples of this
- Your ability to reflect on success and failure, and examples of how you have used both to grow
- Your ability to receive constructive criticism and feedback
- Your understanding of a need of work-life balance

Often interviewers will ask questions directly designed to assess your level of personal maturity. These questions will focus on a life challenge.

As an example: 'tell me about a challenging situation you have encountered in the past year and how you dealt with it'.

See the practice questions for more examples of this.

### ***Overcoming hardship and adversity***

Students who have overcome significant obstacles – whether it be health, family, financial hardships – are recognised as achieving success with limited resources. This is a tremendous accomplishment and demonstrates passion, drive and a true commitment. Students who come from underserved areas are also more likely to serve these areas in the future and are additionally desirable.

If you have had hardship, do not overplay it, but do not be scared about bringing it up. It can demonstrate honesty and humility and be a powerful addition to your interview.

## 6.6 INTEGRITY AND HONESTY

Integrity and honesty are one of the most highly valued qualities in health care professionals. This encompasses:

- Your ability to recognise and learn from your mistakes
- Your ability to recognise your limitations and seek advice or assistance
- Your capacity to accept feedback and learn from it
- Your ability to deal effectively with criticism

Medical schools are careful to prevent individuals who may end up being unethical, dishonest or criminal doctors that may tarnish the reputation of the university.

Interviewers universally indicate sincerity as one of the most important qualities – everything you say is essentially worthless if the interviewer thinks you are being dishonest at any point.

It is very tempting to embellish your responses and tell ‘white lies’. While oftentimes students get away with this, it is a risky behaviour and consider the risks when thinking about taking this avenue.

## 6.7 INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

Interpersonal skills are the most important aspects of your character that you will need to have when practicing as a medical practitioner – particularly in a hospital setting. You will be required to liaise with not only the patient, but also friends and family and most importantly, your co-workers. As a result, the interviewers will be asking themselves questions throughout the interview. Such questions might include:

- Do you demonstrate compassion for others?
- Are you fully engaged in the interview (i.e. not distracted)?
- Will you be able to inspire trust in your patients?
- Do you express yourself clearly and genuinely?

In addition, cultural competency is very important. As our nation becomes more diverse, physicians must interact effectively with individuals of different cultures, religions, races and socioeconomic backgrounds.

- Are you open-minded, accepting and respectful of different people/cultures?

Demonstrated experience working with different cultures and backgrounds is very positive.

These questions all lead to – “will you be the caring, dedicated, trustworthy physician that all patients seek?” and ultimately – “would the interviewer want you as his/her practitioner?”

## 6.8 LEADERSHIP AND TEAMWORK

The interviewers will want to know whether you possess the skills to be a leader. In other words, they want to know whether you can take initiative, make things happen, and motivate others. This encompasses the following:

- Your capacity to work effectively with other people and demonstrate leadership where appropriate
- Your ability to develop good work relations with others
- Your ability to support and motivate others.

They may ask you directly about any leadership roles you have assumed in your life. When prompted, you should *consider*:

- How did you develop personally as a result of the leadership role
- Were there any obstacles or challenges that you had to overcome?
- How did you handle the responsibilities and what did you learn?
- How will this help you as a medical practitioner?

You should remember that you may not be required to talk about these, but more often than not you will be prompted and it is always good to consider these, because you can still work them into your response.

## 6.9 YOUR FIT WITH THE MEDICAL SCHOOL

Each medical school has its own focus, mission, learning environment and programs. For example, some schools focus on medical research and others take pride in producing doctors excellent in primary care.

Carefully consider the mission of the school as part of your preparation and plan to reinforce throughout your interview your fit with the medical school.

Be careful not to go overboard with this as it can sound forced and insincere.

## 6.10 PUT YOURSELF IN THE SHOES OF THE INTERVIEWER

Interviewers are trained to look for the characteristics described above. However, it is important that we remember that interviewers are only human. Human beings subjectively interpret answers based on their impression of a person – if they like you, they are likely to view your answers in a more positive light (see section 5.2).

Remember that your interviewer may be well rested and energetic, but at the same time they may be tired and stressed. They may have had a tough week at work (remember that interviewers aren't paid for their role and do it as a volunteer), and may be tired or bored after listening to many applicants.

Regardless of the state of your interviewer, ***it is your job to make the interviewers job as easy as possible.*** Remember section 5.1 – the interview is your opportunity to *show* them who you are, not for them to find out about you. As such, it is worthwhile putting yourself in the interviewers shoes, and considering the following questions when formulating your prepared responses and perfecting your interview technique:

**What is going to make the job of the interviewers easier when they are evaluating your performance? Did you show them why you are the ideal candidate?**

Prepare your responses in such a way that you make the job easy for the interviewers. In all your answers you should be highlighting the qualities and characteristics that would make you a good health professional, your fit with the medical school and you should be delivering these answers with energy and warmth.

**Are you as the applicant energetic?**

Most people are overworked, sleep deprived or a combination of both. Assume you will be better rested than your interviewer. Your interviewer may not have any motivation to bring energy to the interview, particularly if they have interviewed many applicants before – it is up to you to engage them, instil positive emotions in them and leave them with a favourable impression.

**Was the interview fun?**

Remember, interviewers are humans. By being prepared, interesting, engaging and comfortable, you can make an interview more fun for them. This will naturally lead to a more favourable impression.

**Was the exchange polite, pleasant and well natured?**

Focus on the positives, do not talk down other individuals or institutions, do not appear arrogant. No matter what happens, refrain from being antagonistic or confrontational. Create and maintain a positive environment and that will lead to a more favourable post interview evaluation.

**What was different about you compared to all other applicants?**

Humans naturally learn through comparison. How do you compare to all the other applicants? Make yourself unique and memorable – in a positive way.

## 7. FORMULATING YOUR PREPARED RESPONSES

This section will provide specific advice to assist you in formulating your prepared responses in the best possible way. Your responses need to be structured in a way that:

- Highlights your desirable characteristics (see section 7)
- Demonstrates evidence of your desirable characteristics – skills and experiences
- Is interesting, engaging, and tells a story reflecting the broader purpose behind your education and career choices
- Does not sound rehearsed

You should apply all the information in this section when constructing prepared responses from the sample questions and preparing for your interview.

### 7.1 FOCUS ON WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY, NOT HOW YOU ARE GOING TO SAY IT

When formulating prepared responses it is important to avoid sounding rehearsed. Memorising answers and delivering them in a rehearsed way can sometimes be worse than answering 'I don't know' for a question. Further, some candidates become anxious and flustered when they cannot remember a specific point they planned to say in their rehearsed response, which is a dangerous situation.

The way to avoid this depends on the type of interview question that you are preparing for.

#### *Important and highly predictable interview questions*

For questions that are important, and have a high chance of being asked (e.g. why do you want to study medicine?) it is imperative that you formulate a well structured answer that is engaging and demonstrates your passion and positive characteristics and experiences. You should practice delivering this answer to a level where you can say it in your sleep, and then practice perfecting the delivery to avoid sounding rehearsed.

#### *Other interview questions that are less predictable and more variable*

For other interview questions (e.g. how would you resolve conflict between team members) that may or may not be asked, and can be asked with multiple variations, it is best to prepare what you want to say, but not how you are going to say it.

Prepare and learn the points that you wish to cover and the anecdotes that you can use as examples, but do not prepare the way you are going to deliver the answer. When you are practicing responding



to these questions, deliberately state your answer in a different order or format every time. This ensures you remain spontaneous and flexible for any variation of the question that may come up.

Your goal for these questions is not to deliver a perfectly worded response every time, but to ensure your responses convey the correct and a coherent message.

## **7.2 MAKE YOUR RESPONSES UNIQUE IN A POSITIVE WAY**

Interviewers are only human, and humans naturally assess through comparison. Put yourself in the shoes of the interviewer who is interviewing dozens of applicants. What makes you better than the other applicants? Why should he accept you over them?

When the interviewer asks you a question, will you say the same 'correct' response that was given by most of the previous applicants? Or will your response be 'correct' but in a unique way?

## **7.3 TELL THEM A STORY WITH EACH RESPONSE**

Human beings never tire of story time. In fact, it is theorised that humans are naturally wired to connect to stories as it was the fundamental method by which information was passed along prior to the invention of the written language. This is also the reason why 'anecdotal evidence' is so dangerous – humans can hear one story of a persons experiences and latch onto it as if it is gospel.

A great way to make your answers engaging is to focus on telling them a story. A story has a beginning, middle and end. This is particularly important for questions such as 'why do you want to study medicine' – take the interviewers on an emotional ride that makes them feel that they must accept you.

You are a unique and amazing person, and you have lived a life that is completely different to the interviewers and everyone else in the world. Tell the interviewers a fun and creative story about you!

## **7.4 STRUCTURE YOUR ANSWER WELL – STICK TO 3 OR 4 POINTS**

This is a common presentation technique, sometimes called the 'rule of three'. It is well established that humans can only hold a small amount of information in their active memory, and your listener will only remember about three things from your response or presentation.

Sticking to three or four points in your responses makes it easy for the interviewers to engage and allows them to have a clear and non confusing interpretation of your response.

## 7.5 KEEP YOUR ANSWERS TO 1.5 – 3 MINUTES IN LENGTH

This is not a hard and fast rule, but most of your responses should be about this length.

Many candidates respond to direct questions without sufficient depth. For example:

**Q:** what do you think the most important characteristic of a healthcare professional is?

**A:** I believe the most important characteristic of a healthcare professional is empathy. Doctors need empathy in order to establish a genuinely caring relationship with each patient and to allow them to go above and beyond when treating them.

While the above response is 'correct', it did not assist the applicant as it did not demonstrate why the candidate is unique, it did not highlight the candidate's qualities and fit for the profession, and it failed to engage and build additional rapport and positive emotions with the interviewer. By keeping their response short, the applicant has not improved his chances of entry with such a response.

A better response could be as follows:

**A:** While there are a wealth of important characteristics that doctors should possess, I believe the most important characteristic of a healthcare professional is communication skills. This was made extremely clear to me while I was shadowing Dr. Roberts – a cardiologist at the Children's hospital in Westmead. Dr Roberts was incredible at building strong rapport and a genuine connection with all of his patients. While watching him take histories of patients, I was at awe at how he was able to put the patient at ease with his light-hearted nature and well placed humour, and I could see how much the patients felt comfortable and admired him. I believe because of his communication skills, patients really opened up and provided him with a more comprehensive history than they would have otherwise, helping the doctor reach a more accurate diagnosis. It also put them at ease and developed trust.

I firmly believe communication skills underpin the ability to gain rapport with members of a wide range of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, which is key to better treatment and better patient experiences.

While the above response is not 'perfect' by any means, isn't it an improvement?

Remember, this is not a hard and fast rule. Certain responses, such as 'why do you want to study medicine' can be longer. Just remember that each question is an opportunity to show the interviewers why you are an excellent candidate, and do not waste this opportunity with responses that are too short and generic.

## **7.6 MAKE SURE YOU ANSWER THE QUESTION DIRECTLY**

Make it easy for the interviewer, and ensure you answer the question directly. Too many students talk around the question without answering it.

For example:

**Q:** What are your greatest strengths

**A:** Well throughout my experiences volunteering at the Gordon Retirement Villages, I was subject to many difficult situations. Interacting with difficult residents and residents from a range of backgrounds was part of the role, and something I was really good at....

The above response does not make it easy for the interviewer to understand what you are saying. A better response would begin as follows:

**A:** I believe my greatest strengths are my communication skills and ability to connect with a range of individuals. Throughout my experience volunteering.....

## **7.7 USE FACTS AND EXAMPLES TO SUBSTANTIATE YOUR ANSWERS**

Behavioural interviewing is based on one important fundamental premise: past behaviour is the best indication of future behaviour. By learning how you handled a situation in the past, the interviewer will have good insight into how you will handle similar situations in the future.

Take time in every answer to give facts and examples of your experiences where possible. Any individual can make vague and grand statements about how they make a good leader, but facts and experiences bring credibility to your answer.

Anecdotes are a powerful tool to provide facts and examples whilst simultaneously keeping the interviewers engaged and connected.

## **7.8 THE POWER OF ANECDOTES**

Anecdotes that highlight your experiences, demonstrate your positive characteristics, engage the interviewer and build rapport are the closest thing you can get to a magic pill interview technique.

They are powerful for 4 reasons:

### **They show the interviewer you have done extra curricular activities**

Interviewers will rarely ask 'what extracurricular activities have you done?'. It is up to you to demonstrate your motivation and passion for medicine, as well as your diverse range of experiences, by integrating them into your responses

### **They engage the interviewer and build rapport**

Remember that interviews are subjective by definition, and if the interviewer likes you he will view all your responses in a more positive light. Humans naturally engage with stories and anecdotes, and sharing them with the interviewer allows them to connect with you on a more real and personal level.

### **They add credibility to your responses**

Anyone can make grand claims about how they are an excellent and powerful leader. Substantiating this with an example adds credibility.

### **They allow you to stand out and be remembered**

The interviewer is not likely to remember a candidate who gives the same generic 'correct' responses to all the interview questions. By integrating anecdotes and unique experiences, you give the interview more points of reference to remember you above other applicants, which can make a powerful impact on your interview score.

Try and make these anecdotes non academic. They already know that you have to be an academically successful person to be offered an interview. Also try and keep these anecdotes from recent experiences (last few years).

When picking an anecdote, you should stick to the following rules:

### **Identify the skills you want to demonstrate**

Do this prior to thinking of an anecdote. There are many situations that you can draw upon from your experiences. For each question, first identify the skills and qualities you wish to convey. Do you want

to highlight your communication skills? Highlight that you are a good team player? This will allow you to pick the best anecdote.

**Pick an example that is both *specific* and *relevant***

Do not describe an experience in general – pick a specific scenario as an example. Ensure that this is relevant. This will be more engaging as it is telling a story, and provide more credibility.

**Do not lie**

It is usually easy to spot a liar – lack of detail, vagueness in your answer. If you do decide to embellish your experiences, the only ‘safe’ way to do this is to learn all the details to the point where you *actually believed it happened*. This is difficult, so it is usually safer to stick with the truth.

**Focus on yourself**

Your anecdotes and examples should focus on what *you* did in the situation, not what anyone else or what your team did.

*Mistakes to avoid with anecdotes*

There are a couple of mistakes to avoid when integrating anecdotes into your responses:

- Do not go into excessive detail with the story – too much information is confusing and unnecessary. Stick to the minimum information needed to convey your point
- Avoid negative language and derogatory comments about other people. If you are describing a difficult team member for example, do not say he was being ‘lazy’ or ‘annoying’ – use softer language.

## 7.9 USE THE STAR STRUCTURE FOR EXAMPLES AND ANECDOTES

The STAR structure is a simple acronym that can assist you in structuring your examples in your responses:

- Situation: What is the context of the story?
- Task: What were you trying to achieve?
- Action: How did you go about achieving this?
- Result: What was the outcome? What did you do well? What skills did you demonstrate? What could you have done differently?

### *Situation*

Describe the situation and set the context. Make this short and concise, only providing detail that is completely relevant to the story.

### *Task*

Explain specifically what you were trying to achieve. If you are describing a conflict between team members, you must specifically describe that you were trying to resolve the conflict without anyone feeling maligned.

### *Action*

Highlight the skills and attributes of yourself that lead to your effective action. Go into detail with this, and explain what you did, how you did it and why you did it.

### *Result*

Explain what happened at the end. Following this, you can reflect on the experience and the skills that were demonstrated.

## 7.10 CREATE A LIST OF ALL YOUR EXPERIENCES PRIOR TO PREPARING RESPONSES

One useful exercise to undertake prior to preparing responses is to make a list of all of your prior experiences. Be as comprehensive as possible. Having a list will bring all of your experiences into your conscious awareness and will allow you to remember examples and situations that would be useful to integrate in responses that you otherwise would not have thought about.

Include everything in this list:

- School activities
- Hobbies
- Sporting activities
- Music
- Drama
- Volunteer work
- Training
- Achievements (both academic and otherwise)
- Significant life events
- Special skills such as languages

### **7.11 ONLY TALK ABOUT WHAT YOU KNOW**

Interviewers can and sometimes will probe your responses. If your response to a question has a name of a medical condition, ensure you know basic details about what exactly it is. If you mention a role model of yours, make sure you know them in depth to make your claim valid.

### **7.12 BE CONSISTENT – WITH BOTH YOUR APPLICATION AND YOUR PREVIOUS RESPONSES**

Remember to formulate your answers to be consistent with what you have already written in your application.

Further, interviewers might ask questions that cover similar areas – ensure that your responses are always consistent with what has already been said.

### **7.13 IF YOUR FAMILY IS FULL OF DOCTORS – AVOID MENTIONING THIS**

A fair proportion of students who have decided to pursue medicine have a family member who is a doctor and has either encouraged them or exposed them to the medical field from a young age.

There is nothing ‘wrong’ with mentioning that your family is in the health field, but the last thing that you want is to give the impression that you were pushed into medicine by your family. You will also get more credit when talking about any health related work experience if the interviewers do not think that your family member organised it for you.

## **8. ON THE DAY**

There are several things that you must prepare to do on the day of the interview to ensure that you are in peak performance and make the best possible impression of yourself in the interview.

### **8.1 SCHEDULING YOUR INTERVIEW TIME**

If you have a choice about when to schedule your interview time, it might be worth putting some thought into when you would want to complete it.

If you are confident with your abilities and think you can perform comparatively better than the average candidate in an interview setting, it would probably be best to schedule your interview towards the middle of the day and perhaps on the third day or so. By this time, the interviewers would have a very good idea of the average candidate and you will not be so adversely affected if there was a brilliant candidate immediately before you. Further, if you were to go early in the week and day, the interviewers would not have yet developed the 'standard' of the interviewers in their mind.

If you are less confident with your abilities to 'win over' the interviewers, but have solid and true answers, it might be better to go earlier in the day and week. At this stage, the interviewers are not so tired or bored and are more willing to objectively judge your responses.

### **8.2 THE NIGHT BEFORE**

There are a few things to remember in the night before your interview:

#### **1. Prepare everything you need the night before**

Select and iron your clothes, pack everything you need, plan how you are going to get there, set your alarms, etc.

#### **2. Prepare to arrive to the interview early**

Plan to arrive at the interview sufficiently early – 30 minutes early is a good aim. It is much better to be early than to risk having to rush and be late.

If you are running late for your interview – make sure you call ahead and let them know. This needs to be handled well to avoid damaging your initial impressions.

#### **3. Try not to bring family members and romantic partners to the interview**

This can cause undue stress and nervousness. It is fine if they drive you there, but then let them know to come back and meet you after the entire interview process is complete.



#### 4. Sleep

Try and get a good nights sleep before the interview. If you are nervous this might be hard, and it might be worth spending the evening doing something that relaxes you. Also, it is a good idea to sleep well (7-8 hours a night) for the entire week before the interview, so that a single night of poor sleep will not negatively impact your performance.

### 8.3 EAT AS NORMAL

Eat as normal on your interview day, unless your normal diet is not conducive to high energy at the time your interview is. For example, many people on a primarily carbohydrate based diet tend to get sleepy around lunchtime – if this is the case, it is a good idea to research ahead of time alternative meal plans that will sustain your energy at the time of the interview.

Unless you are a regular coffee drinker, it is unadvisable to drink energy drinks or coffee prior to the interview – one of the side effects of excessive caffeine is nervousness, and we do not want to add to that. If you regularly take caffeine, continue that as normal to prevent withdrawals.

### 8.4 GET INTO A GOOD STATE AND ADOPT A POSITIVE MENTAL ATTITUDE

Only a small proportion of communication between human beings is verbal. In addition to the obvious body language, there are also thousands of micro-behaviours, or subcommunications, that human beings make unconsciously. These range from the spontaneity of your behaviour, to the dilation of your pupils.

You cannot control this sub-communication, yet other humans are very perceptive at picking them up in a matter of milliseconds. This is the reason why you can often gather a gut feeling that someone is uneasy, nervous or being dishonest, even if his words are telling a different story.

The only way you can influence this communication is realising that it is an expression of your true internal state. As such, it makes sense to get yourself into a good internal state prior to your interview.

#### Adopt a positive mental attitude

It is known that athletes perform better if they adopt the attitude that they have prepared the best they could, making them more versatile when unexpected obstacles come up. In the same way, go into your interview thinking that you have done the best possible preparation. Do not be guilty about having procrastinated or underprepared – everyone does this.

And remember that if you have underprepared, that your performance at this interview might not reflect your true potential. ***Commit to doing the best you can with the resources and situation you have.***

### **Adopt a positive physiology**

In psychology it has been found that if your body is expressing a certain emotion that your thoughts and feelings will switch to match what your body is expressing. This gives a whole new truth to the phrase 'fake it till you make it'. When you smile, you feel better. When you hold your self high, you feel more confident.

Adopt an empowering physiology for your interview.

### **Project self confidence**

While it is natural to feel nervous for an interview, it is of course best to project self confidence rather than anxiety. Self confidence can convey the message that you are a well qualified applicant and leaves a favourable impression on the interviewers (note that you must not be arrogant). In the days before the interview it might be worthwhile getting into a positive state with some of the following exercises and activities:

- Exercise to channel away nervous energy
- Meditate, use visualisation, controlled breathing and other relaxation techniques.
- Look over your achievements and accomplishments and remember that the faculty wouldn't be interviewing you if they didn't think you have the potential to be a great healthcare professional.

## **8.5 READ YOUR LIST OF EXPERIENCES ON THE MORNING OF THE INTERVIEW**

In the previous section we suggested creating a list of all of your experiences to assist you in formulating anecdotes and examples for your responses.

It would be beneficial to read over this list in the morning of the interview. This will once again bring all of your memories back into your conscious awareness, which will help you to gather examples and provide more comprehensive responses for any new and unexpected questions.

## **8.6 BEHAVE APPROPRIATELY PRIOR TO THE INTERVIEW**

Prior to the interview you will often be asked to wait in a holding area with other interviewees and oftentimes current medical students. Inappropriate behaviour can quickly pass up the chain of command.

Ensure you are polite and friendly to every single person you interact with prior to the interview. Avoid discussing controversial topics and cracking jokes in poor taste with slang.

In most waiting rooms it is fine to talk to other waiting applicants, and it is often a good idea to strike up a casual conversation while waiting. Not only can silence lead to defensive and negative feelings, but having a dorky conversation can be a good social warm up and put both the applicants at a bit more ease.

## **8.7 FIRST IMPRESSIONS**

As mentioned earlier, first impressions are important and DO count.

Some form of a conclusion is made about an interview applicant in the first thirty seconds of an encounter, and after that point for the remainder of the interview, the interviewer will subconsciously discount evidence that does not fit in with this predetermined image of the candidate. Research suggests that over half of your interview score is determined in the initial minutes of the interview.

It can be extremely difficult to overcome a negative first impression for this reason, but also highlights how a good first impression can give disproportional rewards.

You do not have a second chance to make a good first impression, so you must ensure that the following things are handled appropriately:

- Dress and grooming
- Demeanour and energy
- Hand shake
- Smiling
- Introductions

We will discuss each of these in this section.

## 8.8 DRESS CODE AND GROOMING

The profession of medicine is conservative, and the best way to dress for your interview is like a future medical student or medical professional. This is different for men and women.

### *Men*

- Business shirt – ensure this is long sleeve
- Business pants
- Polished leather shoes and matching long socks
- Belt that matches pants and shoes
- A tie
- Suit jacket if weather calls for it – dark solid colours are best
- Clean shaven or tidy facial hair
- Avoid ‘crazy’ hairstyles
- Remove earrings
- Avoid flashy cufflinks
- Keep cologne light

### *Women*

- Business style skirt (extending to at least knee level) or trousers
- Business style shirt or blouse
- Business style shoes or high heels (not too high, and closed toe)
- Hosiery conservative at or near skin colour
- Keep earrings and other jewellery plain
- Avoid provocative clothing
- Keep makeup to a minimum

***Do not ever be remembered for what you are wearing.*** You want to be remembered for your communication skills, personality, strengths and performance.

***Remember that although dress is important, what is much more important is how you carry yourself.***

A candidate wearing an Armani suit who seems insecure and lacks confidence will not make as good of an impression as a candidate in tattered old clothing who exudes warmth, confidence and intelligence.

***KEEP YOUR PHONE AND WATCH ON SILENT WELL BEFORE THE INTERVIEW***

## 8.9 INITIAL BEHAVIOUR AND PERSONALITY

In addition to dress, your initial behaviour and personality strongly impacts the interviewers first impressions of you.

When meeting interviewers, greet them with a smile and a firm handshake. Be genuinely excited to meet them. Learn their names, and address them in the way that they introduced themselves. If they introduce themselves as 'John Smith', it is safest to address him as Dr Smith initially (he will say that you can call him John if he is comfortable). Don't forget to use the doctor title for medical doctors on the interview panel.

Make effort to remember their names. Again as Dale Carnegie said 'a persons name, to that person, is the sweetest sound that they can hear in any language'. Use their name often, they will like you more. Using their names at the conclusion of the interview when thanking them can convey a great ending impression. If you are unsure about their names do not try and guess it – getting it wrong can be embarrassing and rapport breaking.

Wait for the interviewers to ask you to sit. If there is a table in front of you, avoid the temptation to leave your hands under the table – as it gives an impression of timidity. Place them on the table in a comfortable position.

## 8.10 LISTEN

As mentioned before it is very important to listen.

When the interviewer is speaking your attention should be 100% on him or her, and not thinking about your future or past responses. Human beings convey thousands of messages with their 'subcommunication' – body language that is not in our conscious control and awareness, and other humans are very perceptive at picking up on this at a subconscious level. The interviewers will be able to sense if you are not truly present with them and that can break rapport.

This is especially important for those with extroversive personalities. As the interviewer is commenting on your answer, or leading into another question, you may have a triggered memory that you will jump in and talk about.

Resist your urge to interrupt. Try not to ever cut the interviewer off mid-sentence, or when they naturally pause between sentences (or when they are trying to remember a detail). It seems disrespectful and it makes it seem like you think that what you have to say is more important than what others have to say. Let the person finish their thoughts and then continue on with thoughts of your own.

*Remember,* If you are interrupted in the middle of your response it simply means that the interviewer has heard enough and would like to move on to the next question.

### **8.11 PAY ATTENTION TO THE NONVERBAL CUES OF THE INTERVIEWER**

You will not be receiving real time feedback on your performance in the interview. Interviewers will not interrupt you to tell you that you are rambling, they will not say that they are not being engaged. It is up to you to pay attention to the non-verbal cues of the interviewers to determine how well you are doing and to make adjustments on the fly.

Do not get too caught up in this, just be aware of it – your mental energy is better expended elsewhere.

### **8.12 CONCLUDING THE INTERVIEW**

After the conclusion of the body of questions, the interviewers will almost always give you a chance to ask them questions. Whenever they ask you this question, the correct answer is always ‘yes’.

It’s always good to have some questions prepared! This not only gives you a chance to learn more about the course and the university but it will show your interest and enthusiasm. It would be extra beneficial if you could synthesise a question during the interview based on a response from the interviewer. If you could do this, you could start out by saying “you mentioned earlier something about...” – this shows active listening!

Be careful not to ask information to which you should already know the answers. If the information is available easily on the university website, the assumption will be that you didn’t bother to read it. Furthermore, ensure you:

- Do not ask personal questions (‘are you married?’)
- Do not suggest a bias with your questions (‘will I be working primarily in rural areas?’)
- Do not portray a strange or distasteful sense of humour
- Do not ask ‘aggressive’ questions, or ‘why’ questions – ‘Why does the school have no opportunities for elective subjects?’
- Ask open ended questions, rather than yes/no questions
- Keep questions short

Remember to always thank the interviewers for their time and shake their hands once more. This would be a good time to show your memory if you can recall and use their names. If there is a corridor or passageway in which one of the interviewers leads you out to the main foyer, it is a good place to engage in small talk if feasible and leave a lasting impression. This can also be done before the interview if you are being led to the interview room by one of the interviewers.

**8.13 LENGTH OF THE INTERVIEW**

Do not worry too much about how long your interviews go for. People have performed very well with both unusually short and unusually long interviews. Know that if you are made to wait past your scheduled interview time as the person before you has gone a long time, then the interviewers may spend less time with you, but this should not disadvantage you (some may consider it an advantage as it gives them less time for tough questions and less time for you to say something incorrect/dumb).

## 9. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

This section consists of a comprehensive database of interview questions that apply to both semi structured and MMI style interviews. Note that not all styles of questions will be asked at all university interviews, and that MMI interviews have additional styles of questions that will be covered in the next section.

### 9.1 CATEGORISATION OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

There are an overwhelming number of questions in this database alone, let alone the whole range of possible interview questions that you could be asked. As such, there is no way to be perfectly prepared for every question – nor should that be your aim!

The important thing to realise is that most interview questions fall into a specific category of question. Within each of these categories are the most common and important questions, and their variations, as well as less common and important questions. Focus your preparation on the more important questions, and understand that if you encounter a question for which you haven't prepared for, oftentimes you can categorise it into one of the categories discussed here and approach it in the same way.

*Questions that have a broad context and cannot be categorised*

Sometimes interviewers will ask questions that do not fall underneath any obvious category. These questions are often broad and can be addressed in many different ways. An example of this kind of question would be 'if you could spend one evening with anyone, living or dead, who would you spend it with and why?'

Understand that these questions are broad and non-specific because the interviewers are interested on where *you* will take the question. There is no 'correct' answer, but rather the interviews are gathering an insight into your values, motivations and thought processes.



## 9.2 PERSONAL INTRODUCTION QUESTIONS

1. *How are you?*
  - a. *How did you find getting here?*
  - b. *How was your day?*
2. *Tell us a bit about yourself*
  - a. *Tell me about how you came to be here*
3. *Who are you?*
4. *Describe an event in your life and how it shaped you*
5. *Tell us about a time in your life that was very stressful and discuss how you dealt with this period*
6. *What are your hobbies?*
  - a. *What do you like to do in your spare time?*
  - b. *If you had a completely free day, what non-medical activity would you do?*
7. *What has your involvement in extra-curricular activities taught you?*
8. *Would you work if you didn't have to?*
9. *Who is your role model?*
  - a. *Who do you look up to and why?*
  - b. *Common variation - name three of your most important role models*
  - c. *who in your life has influenced you and how?*
  - d. *who are two people in your life that have inspired you and why?*
10. *Name three adjectives that would best describe you*
11. *Pick one symbol or object that would best describe you*
12. *What is your most valued achievement?*
  - a. *What achievements do you take pride in?*

13. *How would you handle clashes between your family life and medical career?*
14. *What was your most/least favourite subject/teacher in high school/university and why?*
15. *If you could change one thing about your high school/university, what would it be?*

### **9.3 MOTIVATION QUESTIONS**

Because of the demanding nature of the training and practice of medicine, motivation is one of the most important non-intellectual traits that are examined in the context of an interview.

1. *Why do you want to study medicine?*
  - a. *Why do you want to become a doctor/dentist?*
  - b. *Why have you chosen to pursue a career in medicine?*
  - c. *What stimulated your interest in medicine?*
  - d. *What major life influences or experiences have lead you to decide to pursue medicine?*
  - e. *What is your motivation for going into this profession?*
  - f. *Why medicine?*
  - g. *Why do you think you would make a good physician?*
  - h. *How do you know medicine is the right career for you?*
2. *You mentioned you want to help people – why not become a nurse, or a social worker?*
3. *What steps have you taken to find out whether medicine is right for you?*
  - a. *What have you read or experienced to prepare for medical entry?*
4. *What would you do if you don't get into medicine?*
  - a. *If you are unsuccessful at obtaining a place in Medicine at this University or any other university, what would you do?*
5. *Where do you see yourself in 5/10/15/20 years?*
  - a. *What does your future hold?*
  - b. *What speciality are you interested in pursuing?*

## 9.4 MEDICINE SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

1. *What do you believe is the most important characteristic of a health care professional?*
2. *How do you think studying medicine will change you?*
3. *What qualities should a medical student have?*
4. *(follow up to 3) which qualities do you believe you have and which of these qualities do you need to work on the most?*
5. *What are your thoughts on the high social status often attributed to health professionals within the community?*
6. *Do you think that medicine is a rewarding career? Why?*
7. *What do you think are some of the negative aspects of practicing medicine?*
8. *What do you think are the most difficult aspects of studying medicine?*

## 9.5 INTROSPECTIVE QUESTIONS

Introspective questions test your self awareness and your ability to understand your own strengths and limitations. This is an important characteristic of a healthcare professional and allows you to deal with patients in non judgemental and unbiased manner.

1. *How would you describe yourself?*
  - a. *Describe your personality*
  - b. *Describe yourself in three words*
2. *How would a friend describe you?*
  - a. *How would a friend describe you in one word?*

3. *Name and describe your strengths and weaknesses*
  - a. *Name and describe your strengths*
  - b. *What are your positive qualities?*
  - c. *Name and describe your weaknesses*
4. *What attribute would you like to change about yourself?*
  - a. *What about yourself would you change if you could?*
5. *Tell me about your greatest failure*
6. *What is the most difficult decision you have made and how did you make it?*
  - a. *What is the most difficult position you have ever defended?*
  - b. *How do you come to make important or difficult decisions?*
  - c. *Describe how you overcame a big obstacle in your life*
7. *(follow up to previous question) What was the decision making process you undertook to decide to pursue medicine?*
8. *What is one of your most defining experiences?*
  - a. *What experiences have influenced your decision to pursue medicine?*
9. *How do you function under pressure?*
  - a. *How do you function under stress?*
  - b. *Medical school is demanding and stressful, how do you normally handle stress?*
  - c. *When you are busy, how do you handle unexpected interruptions?*
10. *In what situations are you most effective?*
11. *In what situations are you least effective?*

## 9.6 FAMILY AND FRIENDS

1. *Tell me about your family. How would you describe them?*
2. *Are you close with your family?*
3. *What does your father or mother do for a living?*
4. *Who are you closer to, your mother or your father?*
5. *Do you have any siblings? How many? How old are they? Describe them. How is your relationship with them?*
6. *How many friends do you have?*
7. *Tell me about your friends, what unites you as a group?*
8. *Do you have any pets? If so, how do you look after them?*
9. *How would you describe your friends?*

## 9.7 COMMUNICATION AND EMPATHY QUESTIONS

1. *How do you deal with people of different cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds?*

## 9.8 LEADERSHIP QUESTIONS

This is where anecdotes and examples can really come out.

1. *How are/were you different to your school captain?*
  - a. *What is the style of your leadership?*
2. *How would you resolve conflict between team members?*
  - a. *Tell us about a time where your team fell apart. How did you help to resolve this?*
3. *Tell us about a time you were in conflict with another person or group. How did you resolve the conflict?*
  - a. *Have you ever had to work with a difficult person?*
  - b. *Tell me about a time when you successfully handled another person who didn't personally like you.*
4. *Have you ever had to lead a group?*
  - a. *Tell us about a time where you led a team*
5. *If one team member was not pulling his or her weight, how would you approach this?*
6. *How do you define success when you are in a team*

7. *Have you ever had to work in a group? Tell me about your experiences*
  - a. *What team situations have you been involved in?*
8. *Tell us about a time you have helped someone*
9. *Tell us about a time that you have been helped by someone*
10. *What would be your ideal team?*
  - a. *What elements make for an ideal team member?*
11. *What have you done that shows initiative?*

## **9.9 UNIVERSITY SPECIFIC QUESTIONS**

1. *Why do you want to attend (insert university) to study medicine?*
  - a. *What do you know about medicine at this university and why does it appeal to you?*
  - b. *Why did you apply to this medical school?*
  - c. *What interests you most about this medical school?*
  - d. *Why do you want to be a student here?*
  - e. *Describe your ideal medical school*
2. *What do you think you will contribute to this medical school?*
3. *Why do you wish to study interstate? (if you are interviewing for an interstate university)*
4. *Would you be willing to go interstate to study medicine?*
5. *Our university uses a non graded pass system for the first year. Why might you think this is?*
6. *Would you accept a bonded medical place?*

### **9.10 HEALTH ISSUES AND GENERAL MEDICAL KNOWLEDGE**

Note that most of these questions are rare in undergraduate universities – they are more in postgraduate interviews. However, they have been known to come up in the past, particularly in MMI interview formats.

1. *What do you know about rural health?*
2. *Contrast conventional, complimentary and alternative medicine*
3. *What are some problems with Australia's health service?*
4. *Where do you see medicine going in the future?*
  - a. *What are some current trends in medicine?*
  - b. *What do you think about the changes taking place in medicine?*
5. *What do you think it would be like to work in medicine in 20 years?*

### **9.11 WORK EXPERIENCE QUESTIONS**

These questions are quite rare – it is usually up to you to tell the interviewers about your work and life experiences by smoothly integrating them into your answers. However, the following questions could be asked directly – particularly in MMI interview formats.

1. *Tell me about any paid work you have done*
2. *Tell me about any work experience or charity work you have done*
3. *Have you had any experience in the medical field? If so what did you like and dislike about the experience?*
4. *What extracurricular activities have you been involved in?*

**9.12 CONCLUDING QUESTIONS**

1. *Why should we accept you?*
  - a. *There are many qualified applicants, why should we select you?*
  - b. *What do you offer that others don't?*
2. *Is there anything else you wish to add?*
3. *Do you have any questions for me?*


**9.13 OTHER QUESTIONS**

1. *Have you had interview training?*



***For the full Interview Guide (including MMI Interviews and specific University interview formats), enrol in the MedStart Interview Blitz Course today!***

***From the team at MedStart,  
we wish you the very best of luck  
in your interview preparation and  
every success into the future!***



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