



Dreaming of Becoming a Physician?



This is a great time to pursue that dream. Alaska already has 375 fewer doctors than it needs to give the same level of care patients enjoy in the Lower 48. In 20 years, Alaska will need twice its current 1,347 physicians to meet the needs of its elderly population.¹ Also, WWAMI has just doubled its annual intake to 20.² Through WWAMI, Alaska students pay in-state tuition at top-ranked U. Washington medical school, and are allowed to spend almost three of their four years of medical school in Alaska. Since Monty Hawkins, our

new document delivery clerk has his sights firmly set on joining the class of 2012, we asked him to share some highlights of his journey so far, along with some aids for fellow travelers. Here's Monty!

Half of those who apply to medical school don't get accepted. The most important question you must answer is, "Are you sure you want to study medicine?" Maybe you need more information before deciding. When I was 19 I lived in Mexico for two years. There I met Pedro and Carolina, a young couple completing a year of rural medical service before graduating from medical school. They invited me into their home and regaled me with amazing stories of their practice among the poor in rural Mexico. Their stories really piqued my interest.

Clinical Exposure Returning to the U.S., I attended Brigham Young University. Not sure exactly what I wanted to study, I followed instead the happy advice to "Choose a major you will enjoy," and chose Spanish translation. A friend suggested I use my Spanish at Mountainlands Community Health Center, a clinic dedicated to low-income and underserved families. Nearly 75 percent of their patients speak only Spanish. I volunteered as medical interpreter for physicians assistant Richard Laubersheimer. I interacted with a wide array of patients in the examination and procedure rooms providing a portal through which they could express their questions and concerns to Richard, then returning his questions, comments, and recommendations to them in their own language. As I gained more experience my medical vocabulary improved and I enjoyed my work more and more. I was amazed that Richard could ask just the right question to bring out some critical fact that had not been readily apparent before, and his patients departed happier than on arrival.

Physician Shadowing To gain further insight into a physician's life, I sought opportunities to job shadow by calling up doctors in the phone book. Many declined due to patient privacy concerns, but I did not give up! In the end I found an otolaryngologist, a hospital chief medical officer/neonatologist, an oncologist/hematologist, and an orthopedic surgeon with whom I spent 7 hours in an operating room. I gained many valuable insights and recommend shadowing a variety of

physicians. Start by asking your own family doctor, and don't forget to send the all-important thank-you note afterwards.

Community Involvement There are lots of opportunities to get involved, but choose something you believe in and can bring passion to. You'll get a welcome break from school and have something to look forward to each week, and may also gain leadership experience. I was a Boy Scout communications merit badge councilor for a spell, and volunteered weekly for over a year in a Head Start program. But my most memorable experience was teaching Viorica Schiopu, a 75 year old Romanian immigrant, to read. She had an intense desire to learn English and I made time three nights a week to help her. We quickly became good friends, and I even helped her get American citizenship. I enjoyed watching her gain greater independence as her English improved and I believe I learned more from her than she from me. Viorica spoke often to me in Romanian, and after three years I'm comfortable though not yet fluent in her language.

Academic Research Drawn to research, but lacking in contacts, I went knocking on the door of Dr. Jack W. Sites Jr. and found myself working for three years in the tedious business of extracting DNA from neotropical treefrogs. However I stuck with it and was later well rewarded with grants and scholarships to spend three weeks in the tropical rainforest of French Guiana collecting insects, reptiles, and amphibians, and ten weeks studying Patagonian lizards in Argentina. I have presented my research at three international venues (Alaska, Venezuela, and Argentina) and am first author in a paper published in the peer-reviewed journal *Zootaxa*.

Summer Internships are a great way for college students to do research or assist in a clinical setting. The First Alaskans Institute's Summer Internship Program placed me in a clinic at St. Mary's, a Yup'ik village about 450 miles northwest of Anchorage where I was exposed to every aspect of the clinic, even driving the ambulance!

So, don't spend your undergraduate years locked away in the library. Be well-rounded, active in your community doing things you enjoy. Medical school admissions committees look for applicants who stand out in many areas, not just GPA.. The journey you are able to embark on is an exciting one. Enjoy the ride!

Resources

1. "Alaska Physician Shortage Expected To Increase." (Oct 5, 2006). *Kaiser Daily Health Policy Rpt.* <http://tinyurl.com/2ccdt>
2. "Medical program change doubles AK enrollment." (Sept. 18, 2007) *The Northern Light.* <http://tinyurl.com/292f5x>
4. *Nontraditional medical student.* <http://tinyurl.com/2ysyu3>
5. Primary medical school application. <http://tinyurl.com/2hwzf>
6. *SDN: The Student Doctor Network.* <http://studentdoctor.net/>
7. UAA's pre-med website: <http://tinyurl.com/279f3t>
8. WWAMI Program: <http://tinyurl.com/22szno>