

Real-life story - Lydia Acquah

Lydia is a student in her second year of medical school and describes how she is working to achieve her dream job. She writes about seeking out the support she needed from teachers and organisations like the Social Mobility Foundation along the way.

Lydia Acquah

Medical Student

Employer or university

N/A

Lydia Acquah portrait

If you'd told me a few years ago that I'd be writing this having just finished my 1st year of medical school at Imperial College, I'd have laughed in disbelief.

My journey

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Medicine seemed like a distant, unattainable dream reserved only for the grammar, private or public school-educated or the 'lucky few' who came through the state school system. I have done a lot of growing since then, and I have come to find that with enough commitment and support it is possible to enter and succeed in medical school, regardless of your background.

I went to a non-selective state school in South London from year 7 all the way to year 13. It was a long and challenging ride but was invaluable in preparing me to be the kind of student that I am today. I went to a school that had a high staff turnover which meant that at times there was a shortage of staff and I had to teach myself large amounts of the curriculum. Being one of the few academically-minded students meant finding extra work

to do outside of class to ensure I was challenging myself enough to get the highest grades. Also, my school does not have a tradition of sending students to medical school. I am the second person from my school to go to medical school, the first entering medical school ten years before I did. This meant I had to be extremely proactive in seeking out mentorship and placement opportunities in order to maximise my chances of getting into medical school. These great character-forming experiences taught me the much needed work ethic, focus and drive that are essential to obtaining a place at medical school. I truly believe that being in an environment where not everyone saw the importance of hard work or academic attainment made me value opportunities more when they came along.

I definitely had help along the way. I was very fortunate to have several supportive teachers who encouraged and stretched me intellectually and in my extra-curricular activities. A group of teachers at my school provided me with several books on personal statements, entrance exams and interview technique, and helped to cover the costs of entrance exams; it is definitely worth asking if such support is available. One teacher in particular, who had a lot of experience with medical school applications, mentored me. She kept a watchful eye over me academically, read through my endless personal statement redrafts and gave me useful resources for interviews.

Social Mobility Foundation

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I recognise that not everyone has access to such support, but there are wonderful alternatives that I also benefited from immensely. The Social Mobility Foundation was one such organisation. They provided me with a mentor who was already a doctor, organised several group workshops for personal statements, interviews and provided work experience opportunities. I also found resources like The Student Room to be very useful, but it is worth taking the advice given with discretion.

Work experience

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For work experience I undertook a placement at a GP surgery, shadowed surgeons and volunteered in a care home.

It was very challenging securing these placements, most of which came about by persistently calling and asking around. Placements are hard to come by, so it is important to be creative with the opportunities you have and try not to limit yourself to clinical placements. For example, asking to mentor a younger student at school might be a great way of learning some of the principle skills you are likely to encounter on a clinical placement such as communicating confidently with patients, dealing with confidential information, and being empathetic and non-judgemental.

Advice and tips

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Getting into medical school is difficult but far from impossible: understanding what makes a strong application (as outlined below) helps to demystify the process and certainly gave me a realistic benchmark to reach. Working hard at each part of the application process and being positive about your personal journey can go a long way. After all, we need a medical workforce that is as diverse as the population it serves.

My best pieces of advice would be to seek out mentorship programmes. Some universities run these, as well as charity organisations like the Social Mobility Foundation. Start early with work experience, personal statements, entrance exams and interviews, to ensure you achieve your best. Get help from teachers, organisations, friends and family - this can take on many forms, from reading personal statements to giving mock interviews. Make sure you have the grades: applying to medical school is a highly competitive process, so As and A*s are an essential part of your application. Most of all, stay committed. Medicine is a marathon not a sprint, so make the investment in yourself now - it will pay dividends in the future!

Final note

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Finally, maintaining extra-curricular activities is important because it develops skills that are useful for medicine but which are beyond the scope of a GCSE or A level syllabus. It also helps to demonstrate that you are a well-rounded person. My activity was music and I became a member of my school's choirs, the orchestra, and dramatic productions. Through these I learnt how to manage my time appropriately, interact with people more effectively and most importantly, it gave me an outlet to express my musical interests.

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