Medical Students

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Electives

An elective is usually a much anticipated part of a medical student's training and can often be the highlight of their undergraduate years.

The elective is anywhere between a 6 -12 week period (depending on the medical school) where medical students study away from their home medical school. Often this time is spent abroad. The elective can be used as an opportunity to learn more about yourself and to explore a particular area of medicine. You can also choose to do an elective in medical research or even to explore different non-clinical skills such as teaching. The timing of the elective will depend on your medical school, but it usually occurs during your years of clinical study.

Overview

Wherever you decide to go or whatever you do, it is important to choose an elective that:

- will develop your educational needs
- does not mean that you are placing yourself into an overly dangerous environment e.g. in a politically instable country
- will be the right kind of experience that *you* want

You should be able to get information from your medical school about:

- grants to help you finance your elective
- preparing for travelling to developing countries and poverty-stricken areas
- a travel checklist (including vaccination and visa requirements)
- insurance and malpractice cover

Deciding where to go

Many medical students take the opportunity to learn more about non-NHS organisations or they decide to experience medicine in a different setting. This may be in the UK, although many go overseas for their electives.

Going overseas will give you a chance to experience a different culture. Going to a developing country may appeal to you as a chance to do some relief work and you will be likely to have more of an opportunity to have a hands-on experience. On the other hand, going to a highly-developed country may give you the chance to see some very high tech procedures and equipment. You may also use an elective to work in a country that you might consider moving to later in training. You can choose from a huge variety of experiences.

For some examples of where students have gone in the past look at the student BMJ website. Your medical school will also have records of where past students have gone for their electives.

Deciding what to do

The work of researching and organising the elective is up to you, and it is best to start your research early. Remember that some elective opportunities are very popular and have long waiting lists e.g. an elective in the some of the top US hospitals; and in very popular destinations, such as the Caribbean. You may need to apply (or at least get in contact with them) up to two years in advance.

Some points to consider are whether:

- to go overseas or to stay in the UK

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- you have financial commitments that might mean it is too expensive to go overseas
- you have dependants in the UK
- you want to go somewhere your medical school has a link with, as the elective may be better organised (and you may have the opportunity to receive teaching and possibly accommodation)
- English is spoken in the country you would like to go to, or whether you need a foreign language

Exploring a few choices to begin with is advisable, so that you can compare a few ideas to get a picture of what appeals to you. It is also best to have a back-up plan in case your first choice does not work out.

Training overseas after medical school?

For some the elective is seen as the most convenient time during medical training to spend a little time overseas. In foundation years it can prove difficult to train abroad, as your foundation school will need proof that your foundation competencies will be signed off in the same way as they would be by your educational supervisor in the UK. You will need to provide a lot of paperwork in order to prove this and it is rare that the foundation school is able to approve such a request.

For more information see our guide to medical training abroad.

Resources

The IIME (Institute for International Medical Education) produces a database of medical schools around the world. This is useful if you wish to make direct enquiries as to whether they accept students on electives.

The BMA website has a good guide on student electives (for BMA members only)

The MDU website.

The MDDUS website.

The MPS website.

The foreign office website gives good travel advice by country.

Money4medstudents has a comprehensive list of available grants for electives.

The Royal Society of Medicine awards some bursaries for electives.

The Electives Network - Free resource for MDU members

Projects Abroad

Work the World

Medical Electives

Medic Journey International (this company is currently organising a number of elective prizes to students to help them fund medical elective placements). They also have a specific medical expedition website: http://www.mjexpedition.com/

Book – 'The Medics Guide to Work and Electives Around the World'- by Mark Wilson.

Royal College of Physicians medical student elective bursaries

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