

A fourth-year's guide to accepting that you probably won't get into medical school

by Jeremy Lant

Many undergraduate science students believe that they will get into medical school. However, with the average Canadian medical school acceptance ratings for 2015 being at about 15%, the majority of students who think they will get into medical school are wrong. I was one of those students. Starting off in first-year biomedical sciences, I “knew” that I would get into med school. I was one of the brightest pupils from my high-school science classes and achieved a very high overall GPA, which allowed me to get into Western. Arriving in London in September 2012, I was *so* ready to be a doctor. But by February of the same academic year, I downgraded my confidence to: “I *might* have a chance at med school if I could transform myself into a completely different person and give up any chance of having a social life.”

At the time, I was lucky to have an older brother in his fourth year at Western who was applying to medical schools. My brother worked way harder than I did, was a more responsible student, and had a lot more volunteer and extracurricular experiences than me. And yet, the med-school applications were very challenging for him. I hardly saw my brother during his fourth year, and every time I did he looked like he hadn't slept in a week. This behavior of working like a crazed hermit had increased in him steadily since first year, and in the final quarter of his undergraduate tenure, he was in academic, pre-med overdrive.

In the end, my brother's hard work paid off, and he is now in his third year at Western's Schulich School of Medicine. However, observing my brother's challenging journey into medical school made me reevaluate my own ambitions. Did I really have the patience and determination to memorize every anatomical and physiological caveat of the human body? Would I get bored looking at people's weird ailments every day for the rest of my working life? Did I just want to go to medical school because that was what my older brother was doing? These and other similar questions haunted me throughout my second year. It wasn't until I had some real hands-on laboratory research experience in the following summer that I came to the most important realization of my university career: I should become a scientist.

When we were young, my brother and I had very diverging opinions about LEGO. In my brother's closet was a brigade of perfectly assembled, not-to-be-tampered-with LEGO Star Wars space ships. To me, the spaceships seemed to be neglected as they collected dust, but to my brother, they were perfect. He had spent hours carefully assembling them according to the instructions and he was proud of what he had created. My LEGO collection was much more chaotic. The floor was scattered with land mines of unconnected pieces, and my ceiling fan was decorated with colourful streaks from where I had tested the structural integrity of the space ships I had built (by throwing them at the fan). Where my brother's collection was like a museum, mine was both a garden and a graveyard. I think this analogy demonstrates the difference between a young man who was destined to be a doctor, and a younger man who was destined to be a scientist. In my opinion, a doctor must carefully utilize the available knowledge to treat people in a safe and predictable manner — like building a LEGO spaceship from the instructions. A scientist, on the other hand, needs freedom to explore and test new ideas before they

are put to use, akin to building a LEGO ship without the instructions and then throwing it at the ceiling fan.

In the summer after second year, I had the opportunity to volunteer in a lab doing bioinformatics work on a species of green algae that can no longer derive energy from sunlight. Going from the lecture hall and predictable undergraduate lab courses, into an active and unpredictable research environment was transformative. Suddenly, my academic worth wasn't measured in how much information I could memorize or whether I could reproduce an experiment that had been done countless times before. Instead, it was measured in how hard I was willing to work and my ability to develop new ways of solving problems. Doing "real" research made me see learning in a new light, it was no longer about marks, but about how I could apply what I had learned to research. When I started classes the following September, I was more excited than ever before. I saw each lecture as a potential topic I could dedicate my life to as a scientist, and this helped me to start thinking about my future.

My brother and his experiences in applying for medical school have given me a unique advantage. Unlike many undergraduates, I had a first-person account of what it really takes to get into med school, and what kind of person is best suited to study medicine. I was able to reflect on my choices and change direction, which has allowed me to fast-track and focus on my research career. Now in my fourth year at Western, I have already completed my Honours thesis project and am continuing my research towards an accelerated Master's degree in Biochemistry. Had it not been for my brother's example, I might have worked countless hours to prepare for the MCAT and then fallen short of med school with nothing else to do, which is a reality that many biomedical science graduates face today. Or worse (depending on who you ask), I might have gotten into med school only to realize I would rather have been a scientist.

I write this article as a cautionary tale to younger undergraduates thinking about medicine. Undoubtedly, medicine is an admirable career path (and also lucrative), but you should not default it as your future based on its perks. Think about who you are as a person and the types of problem solving you excel at. If you are a master of memory and careful practice, like my older brother, you might make a great physician. If you are excited by uncharted territory and more likely to throw the LEGO at the fan to see what happens then you might be happier in the world of research.

Jeremy Lant is a fourth-year science undergraduate at Western University. This essay resulted from a science-writing internship in professor David Smith's lab (www.arrogantgenome.com) in the Biology Department at Western.