

King's Student
Perspectives

Medicine

Anne, 2nd year

What attracted you to the course?

To study at Oxbridge had always been a goal of mine; I have always felt that in order to be the best at something, you had to study at the best university, which Oxbridge had always represented in my mind. I had to try. I ended up applying to Cambridge over Oxford because of the feel of the place when I got here: quieter, more picturesque, and with the

reputation of outstanding excellence in research for several years, a field I had always been curious about.

I had decided on studying Medicine from the age of 11 or 12, after a teacher recommended it to me. When it came to university applications, Cambridge immediately stood out. It offered a totally different, traditional course structure, and the idea of being able to concentrate on my studies for three years like any other undergraduate immediately appealed. Firstly I would get to further my scientific curiosity before I became a “real” medic, which I hoped would teach

me to think critically about every clinical procedure I would have to do, by evaluating its relevance and importance to the scientific community. Secondly, it could also lead to a much swifter entry into research, an alternative field I had been entertaining, if I decided that this was for me. Having a BSc built into the course was also a bonus: I realised it couldn't hurt to have an extra science degree under my belt, and other universities offered them on a competitive basis. This took away the concern I felt about not being able to expand my learning in future. It also meant I could carry out research with Cambridge professors if successful... What an opportunity! I couldn't turn it down.



About the course

I didn't know that much about the contents of the course when I applied, just the basic topics as set out in the official prospectus. I didn't quite appreciate the implications of studying biochemistry as a pure (though relevant) subject in the first year. I found it fascinating to

learn the molecular basis of prokaryotic DNA replication, for example, I just couldn't understand what we were learning it for! When I studied first year medicine in 2009, I was sometimes lost in the purity of its science – where was the medical backdrop? But this would come in the second year, to my relief. I advise being patient with first year and learning it well! A lot of the material is referenced in the second year course, and there won't be much time to go over things at that stage.

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Overall, I found second year so much more satisfying than first year. It's when the science you have been learning in the first year is put into its rightful clinical context. The anatomy, biochemistry, physiology and histology become transformed into pathology, pharmacology, neurobiology and human reproduction, each all-encompassing subjects that enmesh a lot of the first year course into things that will be truly relevant to a medical career. But naturally you have to do the ground work first, which is why I imagine the course is structured as it is.

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Specific things that I enjoyed include the pathology course as a whole. Although quite intensive (the number of contact hours rival those of first year anatomy), you will turn up to practicals to learn about the pathogenesis of tuberculosis, for example, and how to recognise it by looking at slides made from real life, human samples. And the lecture course is fantastic; a little bewildering until you get the hang of things, but comprehensive and very clear about what processes you need to understand. My favourites were learning about autoimmunity and transplant rejection – the protective mechanisms going wrong. The neurobiology course I also thoroughly enjoyed. Psychology in Lent term offers new ways to think about how your own mind works, and the practicals even give you some experiments you can perform on yourself to prove them!

How much freedom do you have?

As a medical student, there isn't as much scope for personal choice as other subjects – but that's the nature of the beast. We wouldn't be very good doctors if it were otherwise! Things are livened up slightly in the second year where you choose two special options from a list of eight (analogous to the Student Selected Components of other universities), which introduces the more interesting and specialist topics which are left out of the main lecture courses. These are really rewarding if you put the time into them. That said, your third year is your BA year (BSc in other universities), and you can choose to study almost anything you wish – I know people applying for Management, Spanish and Law, as well as the more traditional scientific subjects of Pathology, Genetics, Pharmacology, Neurobiology and History and Philosophy of Science among others. This is the year where you can tailor things to suit your interests, and if you are beginning to feel that you want a broader career than traditional hospital medicine, you are encouraged to use this year to experiment.

Supervisions

We are really lucky at Cambridge to be offered weekly supervisions by experts in the subjects. Well, perhaps I didn't feel so lucky to begin with – being faced with perhaps your Director of Studies, the person who co-ordinates the teaching of your subject within college, in your first week when everything is still new and foreign-feeling was a terrifying experience for me. In fact it remained that way for a few weeks! But little by little you begin to find your feet and feel more confident about what you're learning and saying, and after that it gets less

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scary, especially if you have a supervision where you're on fire! If you're not feeling like that after a few weeks, there are lots of people you can go to talk to about it.

I was slightly surprised to find, during my supervision, that it was a lot like my interview – I suppose they want to know what you will be like to teach. It was not like a class in sixth form: there is a much greater emphasis on discussion. You are asked a question and you must figure out the answer from the week's material. It's a lot more satisfying than a class, as with the right supervisor, you find yourself thinking independently, constructing arguments on the fly, and moving away from simply taking what people say to be true. But in order to get the most out of supervisions, you are expected to come prepared. That means being up to date with the week's lectures and armed with any questions you had while

reading up about them afterwards, as it ends up a waste of both your and the supervisor's time if you are unable to interact fully. BUT don't worry if this sounds a little unattainable; supervisors know there won't always be time to prepare for supervisions as well as attend lectures, practicals, write essays, take time out for yourself and friends, and participate in any societies you join. I think I have only a couple of supervisions per subject per term where I feel on top of my game. The trick is not to panic, and just try to fit in as much as you can without torturing yourself. Don't let yourself be put off by feeling like you're falling behind (in Medicine, everyone is behind!). There is time during the holidays to catch up on anything you may have neglected (as long as you do try to keep on top of things during term time).

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Your weekly timetable

First year timetable:

Michaelmas term = 10 lectures (1 hour), 2 dissections (2 hours), 1 physiology practical (2 hours) per week, 1 histology class (2 hours) and applied anatomy sessions (2 hours) every two weeks. 2 biochemistry PBL (problem based learning) classes per term and one PfP (Preparing for Patients) briefing and visit. Total: 18.5 hours on average per week. No Saturday lectures.

Lent term = fewer lectures per week as the statistics and sociology modules are examined this term.

Michaelmas term in the first year is pretty intensive but this is because there are three parallel, smaller modules going on which are finished early in Lent term. These modules are Sociology, Statistics and Preparing for Patients (where you visit a GP's surgery in

Michaelmas and Lent), but they're much less work than the core subjects. You should try to spread your time evenly between all subjects, and not just spend all your time on anatomy as it is tempting to do!

Second year timetable:

Michaelmas term = 9 lectures per week (1 hour), 2 pathology practicals (2 hours), one neurobiology practical (2 hours) and one pharmacology practical (3 hours) per week. 4 NHB (Neurobiology and Human Behaviour) practicals per term (2 hours). Total = 19 hours per week on average. No Saturday lectures.

Lent term = fewer practicals but the number of lectures is about the same. However, most of the material is covered in Michaelmas term, with the last two weeks of term being filled by special options lectures.

Easter term = no more core lectures or practicals, just revision sessions. Lectures for special options papers continue.

Practical issues

In the first year, almost all lectures and practicals are on the New Museums site or the Downing site. In the second year, most lectures are on the New Museums site on Free School Lane or the Downing site which is along Tennis Court Road, both a five to ten minute walk from King's. Some of the pharmacology lectures are in the pharmacology department half way down Tennis Court Road, a fifteen minute walk from King's bar. Some pharmacology and pathology lectures are in the Chemistry department at the end of Tennis Court Road, a twenty minute walk from King's bar. All the text books you will ever need are in the King's library (handy since the faculty library is allegedly at Addenbrooke's hospital). Anything that's missing or needs updating can be purchased through the library's request system.

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The application process

The application process is pretty tough! You have to plan everything so far in advance as a medic, what with planning work experience, extra-curricular activities to participate in, personal statements to write to impress, and that's all before the interview if you get one! But it's all part of the challenge, almost a rite of passage. When the interview rolls round, be prepared for some pretty mean science discussions: the emphasis falls away from asking you why you want to be a doctor to delving into an aspect of your A-level course or a reasonable medical or scientific situation that you haven't previously considered in such detail. You'll be expected to work through it. There is no right answer; as long as you show signs of*

active and engaged thought, though, you'll be at least part of the way there.

**Note from the Admissions Office: when we assess applications in Medicine we are aware that it is not always easy to get relevant work experience placements. Whilst we encourage students to explore their interest in the subject, there are many ways of doing this and there are no work experience or extra-curricular requirements. Remember that Cambridge Medicine is a hard science course so the more work you can do to develop your understanding in your science subjects, the better.*

Is there time to do other things?

I found that you have to fight a little for free time. But it's so SO important that you do. You really can't expect yourself to work through every hour you're given for a whole year. Trust me, I tried. I found that

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coxing (rowing) is a good outlet. I hadn't tried it before but the boatie bunch are so great – committed without taking it unnecessarily seriously. I also helped out in the Chapel in my first

year which was so awe-inspiring, it really took my mind off things whenever I was there.

In my second year I had a more administrative role in the Boat Club, meaning that a lot of my free time was taken up with organising things. It was



Anne (second from right) with other King's Boat Club coxes

then that the friends I had made in first year became particularly important. They're such a nice bunch! I haven't found anyone in King's that I thought difficult to get on with, but the friends I have made are particularly supportive. I think everyone is careful to look out for each other, given that we are all under pressure. This particularly goes for the other medics in my year. Being a small number of just eight, we can't fraction off into cliques as in some other colleges. And we all spend so much time together in



Anne coxing King's M2 at the "Bumps" races .

practicals and supervisions that it's difficult not to get to know each other. I've been quite lucky in having such a lovely year – we all make an effort to spend time with each other!

Do you need to do a lot of work in the vacations?

(Cambridge terms are eight weeks with long vacations between them)

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Vacation work really can't be emphasised enough. It sounds a little unfair, given that you work so intensely during term time – you'd think we deserved a little time off! But it really is the strength of the Oxbridge term system. Eight weeks really isn't enough time to learn things as thoroughly as you need to retain information for the medical career ahead. You HAVE to use the free time over the holidays wisely as a medic, or come Easter term when both Michaelmas and Lent feel like very long ago, and there will be too much to learn in the time you have.

The way I manage it is to have a structured break, like going away with family or friends, right at the start of the holidays so I can rest and forget about Cambridge for a week or two. One year this involved just wasting time with my boyfriend for a week. Then, when the holiday is over, I settle down to work, starting by drawing up a list of problem areas that I'll go through first. I take breaks regularly to see friends and catch up – which is just as important as working. But naturally a little more time goes to work, until I'm happy that I actually understand things, to the point where I could explain it clearly to a family member. You only need to do this during the Christmas and Easter holidays after all – then you have three months of summer holiday to actually forget about work! It's pretty intense, and you have to be disciplined, but the feeling when it all pays off at the end of the year is like nothing else, I assure you.

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A note to current King's Medics:

If you would like to write about your experiences of studying Medicine at King's for our prospective Medics to read, please email Kristy in the Admissions Office for further details: undergraduate.admissions@kings.cam.ac.uk.