

# King's Student Perspectives Medicine

Shedeh, 3rd year

## Why did you choose to study Medicine at university?

*I was asked this question quite recently by a friend and was shocked to find that I really couldn't give him an immediate answer! As I'm now a third year, studying medicine has made up a good portion of my life for a significant amount of time, so*

*you would think that I would be able to explain how I got interested more easily, wouldn't you? When I think about it, I'd say that it was in Year 11 aged fifteen or so that it all began (no, I didn't always want to do medicine, like many people claim). Before that, I had my ideas fixed on marketing after being shown the famous Cadbury's advert with a Gorilla on the drum-kit - we had to analyse it in our English class, and I was attracted to the idea of being a really important girl in the city, contributing to marketing proposals, going to posh glass buildings and eating great conference food.*



This is me with a skull!

*You need to do a medical degree, and have years of specialist training in hospitals before you can cut up someone's skull and probe it with various instruments.*

*I can't really remember the moment when I became interested in the brain and realised that*

*what I actually wanted to do was brain surgery. But I somehow started to look into this area in Year 11. At first, I had no idea what was involved - I thought that I could take a course in neuroscience at university and then (with some training) be allowed to be a brain surgeon! But, the more I dug into the details, the more I realised that actually, things aren't that simple. You need a medical degree, and have years of specialist training in hospitals afterwards before you*

*can cut up someone's skull and probe it with various instruments. And so that's what inspired me to study medicine. Interestingly, I no longer want to be a brain surgeon as I've become interested in other areas of medicine, but brain surgery is important because it is what got me into medicine to begin with.*

## What attracted you to the Cambridge course?

*When I looked into course details for Medicine degrees, I loved the fact that the Cambridge course is traditional, with a pre-clinical/clinical divide. I had done some work experience and was terrified by the idea of being asked a question by a consultant on a ward round and not knowing the answer. I felt that having a solid pre-clinical understanding would reduce this risk when I go onto a ward*

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*as a clinical student. I mean, I wouldn't really want to be talking to patients when I don't have the solid understanding I would need to form conclusions. Also, very bluntly, Cambridge is one of the best universities, and I had always aimed for the best, just so that I know that I*

*tried. I knew that I'd regret it more if I didn't apply, rather than if I did apply and was rejected.*

*When you arrived, was it easy to settle in and make friends?*

*So, so easy! At King's, the college family system makes you feel welcome immediately. Each fresher has 'parents' in the year above (and often siblings and*

*The college family system makes you feel welcome immediately.*

*grandparents too!) They're there, waiting near the front lawn as you come out of the chapel service that the College runs especially for you during Freshers' Week, holding a sign with your name on it. Then, they usher you to dinner and*

*look after you, putting you at ease immediately.*

*At the beginning, it's really just a question of relaxing enough to be yourself, which everyone does eventually, even if it's not on day one! The only thing I found difficult about making friends was that I found it quite tiring (I think I tried a bit too hard!). One friend even admitted to me much later that he didn't like me that much when he first met me! The Charmer! But they all came round in the end, and you soon realise that you really can just be yourself.*

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*It's really helpful that the first year accommodation in the Keynes Building makes it easy for everyone to go down to the bar (also the common room) in order to have a chat, since the Keynes rooms are directly above it. That really helps people to mix, and is especially important when you start.*



*College parents*



*King's bar*



Amy, me and Phil in pirate themed fancy dress

## What difference does living in a college make?

*I have spoken to many of my friends who went to universities which don't have a college system like Cambridge, and one recurring theme is that they have felt isolated at university. They often move accommodation from year to year, not necessarily being attached to the same group of people, and they are sometimes forced to share with*

*people they didn't necessarily want to share with, having to make new networks of friends and interrupting the social circles that they were just starting to form.*

*The Cambridge college system blows these kinds of problems out of the water. It allows you to stick with people for an extended amount of time, giving you the opportunity to form close friendships and support networks like you have perhaps never had before. It's certainly not claustrophobic at King's. I find the size of the medical cohort (8 per year, and therefore 24 undergraduates in total across the three years) to be perfect – it's not too small so doesn't become claustrophobic, but not too large so you don't get lost in the mini-cliques that would form.*



Freshers' Week in first year

## When you started the course, was it as you expected? How was the transition from school?

*The Medicine course was as I expected in that we are given a lot of information very quickly. However, what I didn't know about was what that actually meant or felt like, and so I didn't deal with it very well in my first term. I remember by week four just wanting to give up on it all! I thought to myself: 'I worked so hard to get here, and now... this?'*

*I remember by week four just wanting to give up on it all!*

*The main issue that term was that I just hadn't learned how to work as a university student yet. I still expected to be told the right/wrong answer, to be given nice handouts with all the information I needed on them, and to be trained in how to answer the exam questions etc.*



Fundamentally, the actual work for a medical degree is the same at Cambridge as what you do for an A-level course: you make notes, you memorise them, you do past exam papers, and then you go to the real exam with a fairly sound knowledge and expectation of what is to come. However, the key difference at Cambridge is that nobody will shout at you if you fall asleep in the lecture theatre (except the occasional lecturer if you're sitting at the front). Nobody will print you off a specification like at A-level, telling you what could come up in the exam. What is more, the work is much more independent - you don't see lecturers as frequently as A-level teachers, so you don't have the constant presence of someone answering your questions and telling you what you should be doing. This is not to say that the support system at Cambridge isn't good – I mean, it's great! Your supervisors are always there for you to turn to, but there's only so much help that any single supervisor can give you on a course that's so large and diverse!

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*The essential thing to learn as quickly as possible is that it's down to you. You have to go to your lecture even though there's no one there to tell you to. You have to take the initiative to ask the lecturer afterwards if there is something that didn't make sense. You have to make the most of your practical classes whilst you have access to the practical material. And this greater responsibility was something I really, really struggled with at the beginning.*

*I was tired, predominantly from both the social pressures of being a first year student (I was still meeting new people and trying to make a good impression), but also because of the crazy lecture timetable, all the new information being thrown at me, and the confusion of being so tired that I was falling asleep in lectures. Unfortunately, I was also too shy to go up to the lecturer and ask them questions. All in all, I was just, quite frankly, intimidated: everyone else always seemed to know much more than me. Before I embarked on my medical career, I had a vision of me as a hard-worker, able to keep up with the fun, social side of university, whilst also being able to work really hard during term-time, staying on top of everything, making notes and memorizing as I went along. But by about day three of the Cambridge course, it became evident that this was just not plausible. At A-level, you're used to being able to keep on top of things; whereas at Cambridge, if you're keeping on top of things, then it's a massive surprise.*

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*When I went home after the Michaelmas term, that's when I learned how to deal with it all. I settled down, and worked solidly for about four weeks of the Christmas vacation (we have long vacations), allowing myself a break during the festive period and for the new year. By the time I came back to Cambridge, I had a really good picture of what went on in Michaelmas term, and my confidence flourished. Of course, I didn't stay on*

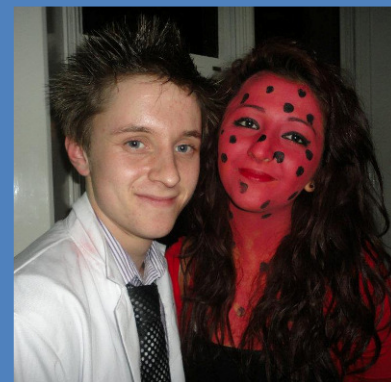
*I developed my own method of doing things... it meant I could enjoy the social aspects of term time more than I otherwise would be able to, whilst still doing well, which worked for me.*

*top of things any more in Lent term, but the difference was that I knew that when I went home, I could achieve a great level of competency and understanding, just by getting on with things. I remember being able to answer questions in anatomy that I had never been able to answer before. For the first time, people were surprised at what I knew, rather than the other way round. It wasn't a matter of showing off, but it was a confidence boost for me to know that I now had things under control: I had developed*

*my own method of doing things, just as everyone else had developed their methods of doing things. Of course, I always felt like I was a term behind, but it meant that I could enjoy the social aspects of term time more than I otherwise would be able to, whilst still doing well, which worked for me.*

## *So what do you like to do when you're not working?*

*As everybody learns to cope with the work, this means that no matter what anyone says to you, there is absolutely a time for social life! Outside of my studies, I particularly love going to the King's College 'formals'. These are three course meals, served to you by the finest catering staff, and they are notorious for being one of the most difficult events to get to!*



With Thomas at a 'Mingle'  
(end of term party)

*King's students love a good bit of fancy dress, and there are many opportunities for this throughout the year.*



Medics at Halloween formal in my first year

*You book them online on Thursdays and Fridays for the following Wednesday, and you find people in the library leaving their desks to get to a computer, or shouts in the*



With Conor and Phil at Christmas formal

*Turing Room (one of the computer rooms at King's) as they frantically press the refresh button. It's all very exciting! The best of these events are 'Superformal' halls, including Halloween, Christmas, Valentine's Day etc. People often go to these in fancy dress, which is always a lot of fun! King's students love a good bit of fancy dress, and there are many opportunities for this throughout the year.*

*Not everything you do outside your studies has to be a big event or a society or sports club activity – it depends what works for you. For example I've never*

*really got into sport at King's, even though rowing is a massive social thing that loads of people like (unfortunately, I'm not much of an early-bird, and the 6am starts got a bit too much for me when I took up coxing at the start of 3<sup>rd</sup> year). Pretty normal things like going out for meals with friends, going to the cinema, hanging out in people's rooms, cooking together and playing random board games or guitar hero have all been things I've really enjoyed doing at Cambridge so far. Oh, also, I'm a sucker for Channel 4 OD, which means I love watching Made In Chelsea, The Big Bang Theory and 2 Broke Girls. Judge me if you must, but there's nothing like looking forward to a good old session of Made In Chelsea, and then ranting about it the following day!*

## *How does the course progress?*

*I quite like how the course progresses at undergraduate level. In first year, you are provided with a solid foundation in anatomy, biochemistry and physiology.*

*The concepts you study that year then allow your understanding of various topics in second year – anatomy is built upon further in neuroanatomy and human reproduction; second year pharmacology is essentially applied biochemistry, and physiology is taken to the next level in pathology. You see real progression*

*in your understanding of how the human body functions.*

*In first year, the focus is on getting your core medical sciences in shape. In second year, the focus is on providing you with the knowledge that will be indispensable for your training at clinical school – teaching you how drugs work, about pathological processes, and disease etc.*

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*Third year (called Part II, which is what I am doing now) is incredibly different. It's a bit of a strange year in that*

*it feels incredibly empty relative to the timetable you experience as a medic in first and second year – the idea is to develop your own interests this year, with fewer lectures and more focus on independent reading around your subject and the construction of your own thoughts, arguments and ideas. I'm not sure if I like it yet, but I'm getting to grips with it*

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*slowly. I always hate new things but end up loving them once I become fully acquainted with them, and so I'm just grinding my teeth and getting on with it, because I know it'll all be better come the end of the year. I'm looking forward to being able to submit my coursework and actually becoming knowledgeable in an area that I would never otherwise have had the opportunity to become knowledgeable in (the history of medicine). I am also looking forward to the graduation ceremony, and starting Clinical School in September.*

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## *What is your week like this year (third year)?*

*Generally speaking, I have one lecture most days (except for Thursdays and Fridays when I have two). As it happens, my lectures all start at either 11am or 2pm, which means that I get lovely lie ins at the moment! I have three supervisions every two weeks, requiring me to write one essay for each. In the afternoons and early evenings, I generally attempt to get back to my room after lunch and dinner in order to try and keep up with reading (I'm doing the History and Philosophy of Science for my third year option, which means that I'm set a lot of different book chapters to read). What tends to happen sometimes, however, is I end up not wanting to go back to my room after dinner, and just hang out with friends in the evening, unless I absolutely need to do some work (if a deadline is approaching, or if my dissertation*

*supervisor really needs changes made as soon as possible to a draft I'm about to hand in.) I generally take most Fridays and Saturdays off to recover from the week, and then I get back to the normal routine on Sunday, which generally means fighting the urge to not stay in the common room for too long!*

## *Where do you live in College?*

*This year, I am living in Bodley's Court – a beautiful collection of rooms that sit right next to the river in King's. My room looks over the river directly, which means that I'm woken up by the gentle sounds of people punting at the weekends (a punt is a kind of boat – see the picture on the left). It's all very lovely!*

*I love living with others because it means you aren't lonely! You can just knock on anyone's door at any moment in time and*



Bodley's Court on a winter day, by the river



Students punting along the river Cam

*they'll let you in and you can have a chat about anything.*

*My lectures so far been so central that I've only ever had to walk to them. They were located at the Downing Site and New Museum Site in first and second year, and now in third year they are located at the New Museum Site only. They have only ever been 5-10 minutes away, meaning that a bike was unnecessary for me.*

## *What do you think people worry about most before they apply for Medicine?*

*I think that a lot of people are afraid of it being too hard for them to handle; that medics have no social lives, and that all they do is work at Cambridge. My answer to that is simple – yes, it's hard (I've tried to be as honest as I can about that!), but no it's not impossible, and you can still have a really, really great time, a really fun social life and (importantly) do really well on the course whilst having a social life. All it requires is dedication when it's necessary. At the beginning, many people spend a lot of unnecessary time working and studying in ways that are time consuming and ineffective.*

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*But after a few terms at Cambridge, you figure out **automatically** what works best for you and how to get the most out of the time you spend studying. Even if you find first year difficult, second year will be much easier, and so will third year etc. I don't feel like I have had any less fun at Cambridge than my friends at other universities have had, and I don't feel like my time at university has been all work and no play. In fact, I feel it's been about 50% work and 50% play!*

*A second thing that people always wonder about is what type of further reading*

*students should do before they come to Cambridge. It's a tricky one if you're approaching it in terms of things that will prepare you for med school, because from what I can see, most of the knowledge you get from reading about Medicine won't stick with you in any way that will be of particular use to you when you come to university, and what does stick with you may be irrelevant or may form the basis of a few introductory lectures.*



With Karolos at the annual King's Funday in my first year



Halloween formal in 2<sup>nd</sup> year



*Part of me thinks that the best thing is to just focus on your A level work or science textbooks as you need to be really really good at the sciences subjects.*

*So part of me thinks that the best thing is to just focus on your A level work or science textbooks as you need to be really really good at the sciences/maths subjects.*

*However, if you're reading for the purposes of interest, rather than directly getting ready for med school, I would recommend some classics such as:*

- ↳ *Genome by Matt Ridley*
- ↳ *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat by Oliver Sacks*
- ↳ *The Selfish Gene by Richard Dawkins*

*These are all books I enjoyed.*

## *How did you find the interviews?*

*The prospect of interviews was scary, but as soon as I walked in and sat down, the faces looked so welcoming that I was no longer terrified by the prospect of having to talk to these people for about half an hour, on my own.*

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*I had no idea what the interviewers were on about for about half of the interview, but I actually expected this from my own research and what my teachers had told me about Oxbridge interviews. They're designed like supervisions, and therefore you're expected to not know, and you have to engage with the interviewer, asking questions and responding to hints in order to get to your answers at the end. In that respect, the interviews were quite fun in the end, since I ended up learning things, which I had come to with the help of the interviewers guiding me through my existing knowledge into unfamiliar territories, that I hadn't thought about before.*

## *Had you done any relevant work experience when you applied?*

*Yes - I did quite a bit of work experience and was lucky because much of it was organised through my school. So I spent 2 weeks at a GP, 2 weeks at a Cardiothoracic Hospital, 2 weeks shadowing a consultant Urologist, just under a year at the British Red Cross, just under a year at a local care home and around 4 months at a local hospice.*

☞ the consultant urologist and GP were both contacts that my school helped me with.

☞ the hospice work was organised by the national council for palliative care (<http://www.ncpc.org.uk/>), who approached a teacher at my school in order to get some students involved with the project.

☞ my involvement at the care home was due to an enrichment programme that my school offered on Wednesday evenings. This and the points above still required phone calls to be made, letters to be sent etc, but the advantage was that I was given the numbers and the addresses.

☞ organisations like the British Red Cross have volunteer and work experience opportunities which you can research on their websites – see for example <http://www.redcross.org.uk/>

☞ the Cardiothoracic hospital placement was the only one I built up from scratch. In order to achieve this, I e-mailed the secretaries of various consultants I found on hospital websites, and just waited patiently for responses. The first successful response came from the secretary of a cardiothoracic consultant who asked for a CV and accepted me for a 2 week placement subsequently. It was a combination of luck and perseverance. I had sent around four letters and twenty e-mails before this one place came back to me.

Note from King's Admissions Office: when assessing applications we are aware that work experience is not easy to organise and can depend on what opportunities are available locally as well as personal circumstances. Voluntary work or work experience can certainly be a good way to find out more and develop interests and skills so we encourage candidates to take opportunities available, however do note that this is not a requirement for a successful application, that there are many other ways to develop interests, and that it is important to maintain a balance with your school work.

## *What are the best and worst things about studying Medicine?*

The worst bit about studying Medicine is feeling that you're never good enough – it's something that happens quite frequently. I've already spoken about this above, but everyone has different speeds of working and different methods of working, which means you'll inevitably find yourself in a situation where other people seem to be doing a lot more than you all the time, which can make you

feel guilty. However, the best thing about Medicine is that, by the end, it doesn't matter – everyone ends up knowing the same things (the same really cool things which make you sound really smart when talking to siblings or parents!). I would definitely re-apply for Medicine if I had to make the choice again – I can't imagine myself doing anything else.

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*A lot of people would think I'm crazy for saying this, but I think I've actually enjoyed the exam terms the most during the course so far! Throughout the year, I tend to worry about whether I'm going to be able to memorise all the information and get to the end of it all. The exam period (the third term of each year) is the time when you can address this. In medicine, the exam term isn't still dominated by supervisors asking you for essays and work, lectures until the very last second, and practicals. It gives you time, therefore, to get to grips with things, because new material slows down and eventually stops all together leaving you time to go over it all. This is when the work you've been doing all culminates and you really become good at your subject. You see progress in yourself much more rapidly at this time of year than you do earlier in the year when you were constantly thinking about the next thing to do. So out of everything, I have particularly enjoyed the exam terms because this is when I'm best able to see the progress I'm making.*

*The exam term is when the work you've been doing all culminates and you really become good at your subject.*

## *How do the exams work for Medicine?*

*The three years of pre-clinical medicine are divided into years titled IA (first year), IB (second year) and Part II (third year).*

*In IA and IB, 50% of your final mark is made up of a 'Second MB' component. These are multiple choice questions, short answer questions or practical exam questions which you must pass – they form part of your medical qualification that you receive at the end of clinical training in year six. The other 50% comes from the Cambridge Tripos System. This is examined through essays.*



Soaked medics on the riverbank in King's after the first year exams

*Part II is purely tripos and is examined with essays and coursework mostly (and practical examination in some subjects). Part II does not count to your final medical qualification, but it forms the overall class mark that you graduate from your third year with.*

*I wouldn't say that Cambridge exams are any different from A-level exams, not for Medicine anyway.*



*I've used the exact same methods to complete my Cambridge exams as I did for my A-levels. The only difference is the essays (which you get used to) and the extra volume of information!*

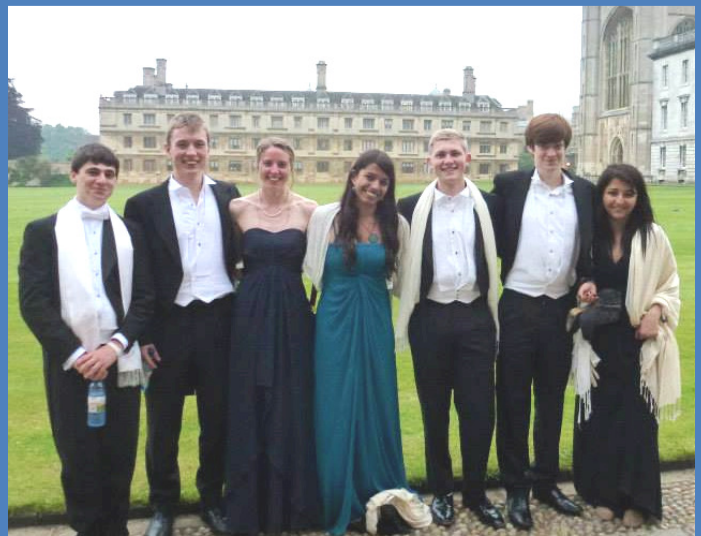
## *Do you have any specific career plans or ambitions?*

*I'd like to be a surgeon when I'm older, but I've not really decided what type of surgery I want to do yet – maybe Ear, Nose and Throat since I loved head and neck anatomy. Support is abundant in Cambridge – from the lecturers who are always willing to talk to you or receive questions by email if you have any concerns, to the heads of papers and departments. Finally there's your own Director of Studies who oversees your education. It's a system that doesn't let you hang alone in the dark.*

*January 2014*

### **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 students to read, please email Kristy in the Admissions Office for further details:  
[undergraduate.admissions@kings.cam.ac.uk](mailto:undergraduate.admissions@kings.cam.ac.uk)



Ready for Queens' May Ball in second year (I'm on the right)