

■ 10th Anniversary Update of International Medical Schools for U.S. Citizens: Considerations for Advisors and Prospective Students

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Introduction

When a student comes to us and says, “I’m considering going to a medical school in another country,” and that student is clearly looking for our help in making a decision, we often are uncomfortable about how to respond because we, ourselves, may not have much specific knowledge about the pros, cons, intricacies, and strategies that would help students learn about international medical education.

We hope the following article, a 10th Anniversary Update of *International Medical Schools for U.S. Citizens: Considerations for Advisors and Prospective Students*¹, will help both you and your students ask and seek answers to important questions. We will try to provide some answers by anticipating some of extra demands of completing a medical school curriculum in another country, suggesting personal qualities that might predict student success, and offering a framework for gathering information about international medical schools.

Prepare for Medical School, and Consider All Options

Some students who go to international medical schools have exotic reasons for their decision, such as wanting to escape their home state or country, but most do so because they believe they

cannot gain admission to a U.S. medical school. Before confronting all of the extra problems posed by getting a medical education in another country, candidates should give themselves every chance for admission to allopathic and osteopathic medical schools in the United States. If they believe they are not competitive, they should consider retaking the courses in which they did not perform well, going further in their science coursework, retaking the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT), and gaining more healthcare experience, perhaps by participating in a formal postbaccalaureate program. If they did apply to U.S. schools and were not accepted, they should consider re-applying after considering why they were not accepted. Even if these candidates eventually choose to attend an international medical school, further academic preparation, additional practice taking standardized tests, and more life experience and maturity, will improve their chances of successfully completing a medical education.

It is possible to gain admission to some international medical schools with less than a 3.0 undergraduate GPA, and without ever taking the MCAT, but to complete the degree, and return to practice medicine in the United States, students must master an extensive basic and

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applied science curriculum, and must pass licensing and certifying exams. And, there are many additional difficulties along this path.

Extra Challenges

One of the biggest issues students should consider is that many of the U.S. citizens who go to international medical schools drop out before completing their medical education. Given the extra pressures on students at international medical schools, many of whom are admitted with marginal academic abilities and test-taking skills, this is not surprising. It is impossible to get accurate, independent measures for attrition rates, and the rates surely differ from school to school, but the possibility of failure is something prospective students should seriously consider. Even if they pass their classes, many are still not able to perform at a high enough level on the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) to compete for a residency.

However, an increasing number of students are successfully completing their educations at international medical schools, meeting the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG) certification conditions required for graduates of international medical schools, matching with residency programs, and eventually become practicing physicians. From the ECFMG Reporter, Issue 202 - March 21, 2013, "Of the 5,095 U.S. citizen IMG participants, 2,706 (53.1%) were matched to first-year positions, an increase of 604 over last year. This is the tenth consecutive year that there has been an increase in the number of U.S. citizen IMGs matching to first-year positions."²

Wherever a student goes, medical education will be expensive! Together with travel, housing, food and other living expenses, and without the tuition discount that a student at an in-state, public medical school would receive, the costs of attending an international medical school, even one with a modest tuition, quickly escalate. U.S. citizens at many international medical schools are eligible for U.S. Government Guaranteed Student Loans, which may be interest subsidized or unsubsidized, and there are other possibilities for borrowing money. If they are not independently or dependently wealthy, medical students will, however, have to go deeply in debt.

The U.S. Department of Education's Financial Aid Office has posted a list of International Medical Schools that participate in Federal Student Loan

Programs,³ and, for each, they show:

- Number of Students Completing the Degree Program and On-Time Degree Completion Rate
- Average Federal, Private, Institutional and Combined Debt Levels
- Loan Default Rates
- Pass Rates of Students and Graduates on U.S. Medical Licensing Exams

All medical students are confronted by academic and financial pressures, but those who attend international medical schools must contend with additional difficulties. Even at well-established international medical schools, students often find more difficult living conditions, less extensive learning resources, more limited teaching and clinical facilities, and fewer permanent faculty members. At some schools, a substantial part of the curriculum is taught in a language other than English. On rare occasions, international medical students have felt threatened by political unrest, hurricanes, earthquakes, and even a volcano.

As if the challenges of completing their medical education in another country were not enough, the candidates who do successfully complete their medical educations at international medical schools must take extra steps to be eligible for accredited residency programs in the U.S., board specialty certification, and state licensure.

Transferring

What about the possibility of heading off the extra difficulties graduates face by transferring, and earning a degree from a medical school in the United States? Many international medical students apply, but few are accepted. The Association of American Medical College's Enrollment Services tracks transfers into U.S. MD-granting medical schools, and from the 2004-2005 to 2013-2014 matriculation years, an average of only 39 international students per year have transferred to U.S. MD-granting medical schools.⁴ Additional students may transfer to osteopathic medical schools, but advisors should warn their advisees that they should not count on being able to transfer into a U.S. medical school. Policies regarding transfers vary from school to school, so interested students should contact the admissions offices of the individual medical schools to which they are planning to apply.

ECFMG Certification

To be eligible for Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) accredited residency programs in the United States, and for licensure in many states, students who graduate from an international medical school must gain ECFMG certification. Some of the most important conditions include proving they graduated from a medical school listed in the Foundation for Advancement of International Medical Education and Research's (FAIMER) International Medical Education Directory (IMED),⁵ and passing USMLE Step 1 Basic Sciences, Step 2 Clinical Knowledge, and Step 2 Clinical Skills.

Residency Matching, Specialty Certification & Licensure

Eligibility for accredited residency programs is not enough. International medical school graduates (IMGs) must prepare to apply for residencies through the National Resident Matching Program (NRMP). It helps to attend a well-established international medical school, perform well on the USMLE, and earn strong recommendations from the directors of clinical rotations in the United States. While in medical school, it is important for students to strategically plan their clinical clerkships in the United States, ideally arranging rotations in the same settings as preferred residency programs.

It is not completely impossible for an IMG to match in a highly competitive area, like a surgery subspecialty, but it is difficult. Proportionally more IMGs go into less competitive specialties, like internal medicine or family practice.⁶

Beyond residency, IMGs may have to contend with some extra board specialty certification and state licensure challenges.

Important Personal Qualities

To successfully contend with all the extra demands placed on students and graduates of international medical schools, candidates who take this path must be extraordinarily determined, motivated and resilient. To handle the basic science curriculum and pass all of the steps of the USMLE, they must be capable students and competent test-takers. They should have the adaptability and independence needed to thrive in another country, ideally already developed through a significant study

or service abroad experience. If a substantial part of the curriculum is taught in a language other than English, they should gain at least a basic proficiency in the language before attending the medical school. They should take initiative, especially when planning their clinical rotations, and be flexible, especially when applying for residency programs. And, they should be prepared to carefully explain their decision to attend an international medical school.

Gathering Information about International Medical Schools

In addition to encouraging students to develop the personal qualities needed to succeed in medical school, and letting them know some of the difficulties pursuing their education in another country could pose, health professions advisors can also help their advisees learn more about individual international medical schools. For those students who decide to go abroad, finding a good fit is important!

The largest concentration of international medical schools for U.S. citizens is in the Caribbean, but there are medical schools with programs for U.S. citizens in Australia, Ireland, Israel, Mexico, the Philippines, Poland, the United Kingdom, and in many other countries. Beyond location, international medical schools differ from each other in many respects, including physical environment and living conditions, safety and security, availability of health care, admissions requirements and procedures, tuition, eligibility for U.S. Government Loan programs, class size, language of instruction, qualifications of faculty, quality of teaching and clinical facilities, level and breadth of academic supports, number and location of affiliated clinical rotation programs at U.S. hospitals, curriculum length and structure, and the rate at which students graduate and successfully match with U.S. residency programs.

As mentioned previously, to be eligible for ECFMG certification, students must graduate from an international medical school listed in the FAIMER's *International Medical Education Directory*. The listings do include some introductory information about each medical school. Students can search the directory by region, country, city, or name of a medical school.

Beginning in mid-2014, IMED will be merged with the World Federation for Medical Education (WFME) Avicenna Directory to produce a single comprehensive

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resource on undergraduate medical education worldwide. The new resource, developed in collaboration with the World Health Organization and the University of Copenhagen, will be known as the World Directory of Medical Schools. This new combined directory will contain additional detailed information on medical schools, including institutions with multiple medical education or other health professions programs, university affiliations, accreditation data, etc. Prospective students will also be able to determine if graduation from a specific medical school is acceptable for licensure in additional countries, such as Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

Interested students should also collect information from websites, articles, reference books, and admissions brochures. They may, for example, want to participate in online discussion forums, like ValueMD. But advisors should warn their student that while such a forum may offer tidbits of good information, one has to be aware that a lot of postings may not be accurate. It is also important for prospective students to talk with admissions representatives, current students and graduates. For balance, it can also be enlightening to talk with disgruntled former students. Every source will have some biases. Admissions people want to recruit new students, and current students may be rationalizing their decision to attend an international medical school. Graduates have more perspective, but few have actually attended multiple medical schools, so it is still difficult for them to make accurate comparisons.

Prospective students should be on guard. Not all sources of information are reliable, and there have been some serious deceptions, including phantom medical schools set-up to scam desperate, want-to-be medical students out of their seat reservation deposits and first-semester tuitions, and, worse yet, diploma mills that sell medical degrees while providing little or no education or training. So, buyers must beware!

Although some students at international medical schools feel their leap of faith got them past first impressions which might discourage visitors, it is important to make a fully informed decision. If possible, it is wise for prospective students to visit the international medical schools they are most interested in attending, to look before they leap. Some international medical schools also sponsor visits by health professions advisors, and these adventures can be both informative and entertaining.

As McLoughlin II, Harvey, and Smulders pointed out in their Foreign Medical Schools from the Premedical Advisor Point of View interest session at the 2002 NAAHP National Conference, even after visiting foreign medical schools, advisors may be left with many questions.

Advising is a form of teaching. Advisors guide students in selecting courses and discuss the requirements for the myriad of health careers that are available to them. The goal is to guide rather than dictate. One of the most effective and straightforward ways that advisors can help students learn about international medical schools is to pose questions for which both advisors themselves and their students can seek answers. Box 1 contains questions that both students and advisors should be asking, and Box 2 has questions that possibly have more relevance for advisors alone. Although not an exhaustive list, it is a starting point. Advisors are encouraged to post additional questions to the HLTHPROF list serve, so everyone can benefit from the expertise that many have developed over years of advising.

Box 1: Some Questions Students Should Ask

1. How long has the International Medical School (IMS) been in existence?
2. How can I contact the IMS – telephone, fax, e-mail address, website?
3. Who is the Dean of Admissions?
4. What are the entrance/admissions requirements?
5. Is an undergraduate degree required in order to start school (matriculate)?
6. Are there specific residency or foreign language requirements?
7. Is the MCAT required or optional?
8. If interviews are required, where are they held?
9. What are mean Science and Overall GPAs for the previous entering class?
10. How many classes of students enter each year, and when are the application deadlines?
11. What are estimated annual expenses, including tuition and fees, books, supplies, study materials, housing, food, travel and other living costs?
12. How do students fund their education? What loan programs and scholarships are students eligible for?
13. How many students are enrolled in each class?

- What is the attrition rate for matriculated students, i.e., how many typically dropout before finishing? What are common reasons for dropping out?
14. What is the length and structure of the entire curriculum?
 15. What are the academic credentials of the faculty teaching basic science courses? Where were they educated?
 16. Where do students do their clinical training?
 17. Does the school arrange for all clinical rotations placements, or are students expected to arrange some rotations on their own?
 18. Does the school have direct signed agreements with hospitals for clinical rotation placements, or does the school use a third-party broker to arrange placements?
 19. What is the average wait time between clinical rotations?
 20. Are all clinical rotations located in the same city, or must students move frequently throughout the clinical years?
 21. Are core clinical rotations at locations with ACGME-accredited residency training programs?
 22. How do students perform on Step I, Step II Clinical Knowledge, and Step II Clinical Skills? In recent years, what are the 1st time and total pass rates for students from this school?
 23. How many students graduate each year?
 24. Where did students in the most recent graduating class match for residency? In what specialties?

Box 2: In Addition, Health Profession Advisors Should Ask

1. Does the IMS provide detailed statistics about admissions, student population, financial expectations, which advisors can use to help students make decisions?
2. Are there web addresses, brochures, or other materials advisors can give to interested students?
3. How is the IMS financed? Who owns/operates the IMS?
4. Are there graduates of the IMS in the advisor's local area who would be available for presentations to students?
5. Are there opportunities for health advisors to visit the IMS?

Conclusion

At their best, international medical schools give their students the education and training needed to enter a residency program, and those graduates who become physicians go on to serve many patients. At their worst, international medical schools take unfair advantage of desperate students, by accepting candidates who are woefully unprepared for the rigors of medical education, the USMLE, or the practice of medicine.

Health professions advisors may never learn enough to feel completely at ease with this topic, but they can invite interested students to talk with them about the possibility of attending medical school in another country. Advisors can help them anticipate some of the extra challenges they might face, and gather information about different schools. If an extra effort is made to stay in contact with students who do attend international medical schools, advisors can learn much more. When advisors visit international medical schools, they can develop their own perspectives. HLTHPROF discussions and international medical schools interest sessions at regional and national health professions advisors meetings are also extremely useful. By sharing what they have learned with each other, all advisors can become more effective in aiding their students.

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