Transition from Undergraduate School to Medical School

Mary L. Brandt, MD
Professor of Surgery, Pediatrics and Ethics
Associate Dean of Student Affairs
Baylor College of Medicine

mary.brandt@bcm.edu
Objectives

• Discuss the key differences between being a college student and a first year medical student
• Identify the important ways students can fail in the transition to medical school
• Discuss the Transition 2 Medical School course developed at Baylor College of Medicine
• Provide a “top ten list” to use in helping prepare graduating seniors for the transition to medical school
• Leave time for questions and comments!
WELCOME
NEW MEDICAL STUDENTS
Temporary ID Badges Here
College vs. Medical School

Academic

• What you learn
  ▫ Volume
  ▫ Complexity

• How you learn

• Different grading system

• Why you learn
  ▫ Practicing your art, not studying for a test
College vs. Medical School

Academic

• What you learn
  ▫ **A semester in medical school is the equivalent of 30+ hours of undergraduate courses**
  ▫ **Your vocabulary triples in medical school – it’s essentially learning a new language**
  ▫ **New educational experiences**
    • Anatomy lab
    • Difficult patient situations
College vs. Medical School

Academic

• How you learn
  ▫ Courses are all mandatory and build on each other from the first day
  ▫ Serious studying from day one
    • Learning what was taught on a daily basis is essential – if you get behind, it’s hard to catch up
  ▫ More memorization than you are used to
    • Particularly hard on the liberal arts majors
  ▫ New techniques for studying are essential
  ▫ Impossible to cram for tests
College vs. Medical School

Academic

- Grades in medical school are competency based, not comparison based
- Support is in place to allow everyone to pass if they are able to meet the bar
  - >95%+ graduation rate
- Collaborative, not competitive education
  - Big change for many students
  - Study groups
College vs. Medical School

Academic

• When you arrive in medical school, you are no longer at the top of the bell shaped curve
College vs. Medical School

Personal

• “Grown-up” expectations
  ▫ For many students, it’s the first time they are really living on their own
  ▫ Different kind of support from professors, deans, peers
  ▫ “Social contract” of medical education
  ▫ “Being a medical student is a 60 hour a week job”

• Finances
  ▫ Debt is significant
  ▫ Money management is often an issue

• Stress of medical school + 20 something
  ▫ Self care often suffers
  ▫ Navigating relationships can be difficult
Most common ways students fail in making the transition to medical school

- Failure to study enough and every day (expectation that they can “cram” like they did in college)
- Getting behind during the first week or two of school
- Becoming disillusioned that they are, for the first time in their life, not in the top 5% of the class
Most common ways students fail in making the transition to medical school

- Inability to plan their days to include adequate studying AND time for exercise, good nutrition, social interactions and sleep
- Isolating themselves from their peers and counselors
- Failure to seek help when they are really struggling – either academically or personally
Transition 2 Medical School

• Depression and suicide are issues in every medical school
  ▫ 45% of medical students meet criteria for burnout
  ▫ 11.2% report suicidal ideation (cf. 6.9% in general population) Drybe, 2006

• In 2009 a task force was developed at Baylor College of Medicine to develop ways to improve student wellness and resilience

• As a result, the “Transition 2 Medical School” course was developed for entering students
Transition 2 Medical School

- Course designed under the leadership of Toi Harris, MD, Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Assistant Dean of Student Affairs
- 1st session during orientation
- Sessions 2 and 3 during first two weeks of medical school
- Peer (MS2 & 3) facilitated small group sessions
Transition 2 Medical School

Course objective

- Facilitate the transition of first-year medical students into medical school, promote wellness and effective stress management and peer support
Transition 2 Medical School
BCM course for entering 1st yr students

• Knowledge
  ▫ Specific ways to promote wellness
  ▫ Techniques to study efficiently and effectively
  ▫ Signs and symptoms of distress

• Skills
  ▫ Techniques to improve relaxation response
  ▫ Empathetic listening
  ▫ Avoiding catastrophic thinking
  ▫ Providing peer support to a friend in distress
Transition 2 Medical School
BCM course for entering 1st yr students

• Attitudes
  ▫ Social contract – why studying is different in medical school
  ▫ Realistic expectations for personal achievement
  ▫ Importance of balance and self-care
  ▫ Seeking help is a virtue in a medical professional

Photo credit
Transition 2 Medical School
Session 1: “The Ins and Outs of Medical School

• Starts with “hat exercise”
  ▫ Students put biggest fear/worry and biggest expectation into a hat

• Medical school culture
  ▫ Fears and expectations
  ▫ Friendship with peers
  ▫ Relationships with upperclassmen

• Overview of the curriculum
  ▫ How to prepare for week 1
  ▫ How to study

• Life outside of medical school
• Available resources
Transition 2 Medical School
Session 2: “Surviving Medical School”

- Check on how group members are handling the workload
- Overview of stressors (professors, classmates, expectations from self/family/classmates, maintaining relationships)
- Teach about how to recognize and manage the stress response
  - Techniques to reduce the stress response
  - Importance of sleep, exercise, community
Transition 2 Medical School
Session 3: “Long-term success in Medical School”

- Peer support/empathy
- Define stressors and different responses students may use
  - Know it all (let me tell you how I do it)
  - Minimizing (It’s not that bad..)
  - Buck up (It’s bad… just deal with it)
  - One-up response (You think that’s bad…)
- Conflict resolution
- Personal relationships
- How and when to seek professional help
Top Ten Tips for students making the transition into medical school
1. Arrive a Week Early (at least)

- Move in with enough time to make your new space a real home
- Make sure your electricity and cable are working
- Meet your neighbors
- Find the nearest gym
- Stock your pantry with healthy food
- Find the best way to get to class
  - Bike, run or walk?
  - Bus, car?
  - Parking?
2. Buy a good computer and the appropriate software

- **Computer**
  - Look on line or see what your school requires
  - Needs to have fast and reliable video, internet, etc...
  - Needs to be a laptop (you’ll take notes in class and will also take exams on your own computer)

- **Microsoft Office (newest version)**

- **One Note (PC) or Growly (Apple) for notes (highly recommended by our students)**
3. Set up your study space before the first day of class

- Consider connecting your laptop to two monitors
- Buy a really good chair
- If you listen to music, get good speakers for your computer
- Put reminders on your desk of why you are doing this for the times it’s not so easy
- Think about a second, active desk (walking, bicycling) to study without sitting
4. Learn active studying skills and apply them from day one

- **SQR3 method**
  - **Survey** notes before class
  - **Think** actively about what **Questions** will be answered during the lecture, in the notes and in any assigned reading
  - **Read** to make sure all questions are answered
  - **Recite** important points (out loud)
  - **Review** – 1 day later, 2 days later, 1 week later, etc… 5-6 repetitions are necessary before you truly learn the material
5. Go to class (and be really present)

- Time spent in class should be active learning time
  - Review the notes before the class
  - Ask questions if it’s not clear

- Lectures in medical school are recorded and you can stream them at home but…
  - You miss being able to ask questions
  - It’s harder to stay actively engaged in learning while you listen
  - You miss the social benefits of being with your class
6. Start with studying 1 hour/day for every hour of class. Adjust up if needed.

- Schedule this like work
  - Use a calendar to plan your day
  - Don’t forget it’s a 60 hour work week

- Learn to use “study reps”
  - Set a timer with an alarm
  - 45-50 minutes of all out studying followed by
  - 10-15 min of absolutely no studying
7. Exercise at least 30 minutes every day

• Your goal should be an hour a day, but 30 minutes is the minimum
• Consider riding a bike or walking to school (double tasking your commute and your exercise)
• Take the stairs!
• Why exercise is important for medical students
  ▫ Stress reduction, mood stabilizer
  ▫ No “freshman 10”
  ▫ Mitigates some (but not all) of your sitting
  ▫ Helps prevent work related injuries associated with being a physician
8. Plan your day so you can sleep 8 hours a night

- No sleep = poor synapse formation
- Poor synapse formation = no learning
- It’s that simple.

- Don’t believe yourself or anyone else who says they “don’t need” 8 hours of sleep. It’s not true.
- No caffeine after noon (it’s a drug with a half-life…look it up)
Tips to help you go to bed early:
* Keep a regular bedtime schedule, even on the weekends
* Regular day exercise can help you sleep
* Reading a book or magazine before bed
* Make sure your bed is comfortable and the room is quiet
* Avoid eating foods high in caffeine and drink less fluids before going to bed
* Try a relaxing routine like taking a hot bath before bed
* Avoid eating meals before going to sleep
* Don’t wait for the last minute to write a paper or cram for an exam

When you get up from sleep ..... “Make Your Bed”

- A symbolic reminder to yourself that you are taking care of yourself
9. Eat Real Food

- Good fuel is necessary for your brain to make the synapses that are needed to learn
- Eat every 4-6 hours to maintain your blood glucose
- Shop on the outside of the store (where the real food is) and cook it yourself!
- If you don’t cook, make a conscious choice to buy prepared food that is healthy
10. Make friends and work to maintain those friendships

- Social connections are one of the strongest antidotes to the stress of medical school
- Friends you make in medical school are important because they understand what you are going through
- Friends outside of medical school are important because they aren’t experiencing what you are experiencing.
- Your significant other is your most important friend
What should you tell students to do the summer before medical school?
Spend Your Summer Getting Ready for Medical School by….

• Developing an exercise habit
  ▫ If you can become a runner ….do!
    • Efficient, cheap, doesn’t require equipment
    • Social outlet for many medical students
  ▫ If you hate running, find something else
    • Bicycling, spin class
    • Zumba or other aerobic classes at a gym
    • Strength training
Spend Your Summer Getting Ready for Medical School by….

• Learning how to cook and buying what you need to cook
  ▫ Ask family members to teach you or take classes
  ▫ Pressure cooker
  ▫ Steamer
  ▫ Crock pot
  ▫ Cookbooks
  ▫ Cooking utensils
Spend Your Summer Getting Ready for Medical School by....

• Refueling
  ▫ Don’t study.
    • It won’t help
    • Seriously… don’t do it.
  ▫ Read novels, see movies
  ▫ Hang out with friends
  ▫ Take a vacation
    • Or two
    • Or three
Objectives

• Discuss the key differences between being a college student and a first year medical student
• Identify the important ways students can fail in the transition to medical school
• Discuss the Transition 2 Medical School course developed at Baylor College of Medicine
• Provide a “top ten list” for you to use in helping prepare graduating seniors for the transition to medical school
• Leave time for questions and comments!
Thank you for all you do to help our (and other) students!