

Exploring Options: Getting Personal

No decision as important as career choice should be made in a vacuum. Gather as much information as possible on your top three medical specialty choices, employing library research, online research, and consultation with professional medical associations, and at least one physician in each specialty being considered.

Library Research

Locate a major text in each specialty, which should offer an overview of clinical practice in that specialty. In addition, locate the major journals for the specialty. Spend time reviewing the contents of those journals and books. Read at least the two most recent issues from the top journals, paying close attention to articles on new research in the field, including the names and practice locations of the researchers. Look for physicians who have been honored for their contributions to professional practice. Read letters to the editor for what practitioners are saying about the journal and the field. Try to get a sense of the specialty and its future; new areas of clinical focus; who's doing what, and where; and which areas particularly appeal to you.

More Online Research

The Internet is an increasingly useful source of information. While it has limitations, its "24-7" accessibility make it a "must use" resource. Many specialty organizations have information available online, including access to journals and major newsletters. Journal access is usually by subscription, but many specialty organizations place abstracts or tables of contents online. There are also a number of full text journals available on the Web. Check the Careers in Medicine Web site to see what's available. As you begin more in-depth exploration of specific specialties, use the links to the specialty associations and publications available in the Careers in Medicine Specialty Pages. You can also use a search engine to locate additional information. Search the Web using terms like specialty name, the names of teaching/research facilities and physicians you found in your library research.

Association Consultation

Specialty associations are valuable sources of information. First, find out what publications the association provides and what information they offer to medical students considering this specialty. If this specialty is your first choice, inquire about signing up as a student member. Regardless of whether you join immediately, ask if newsletters are available for the specialty, and request the two most recent copies. Perhaps even more than journals, newsletters give you a sense of the daily practice of a specialty. Many even have job listings, giving you a sense of where various positions are being offered. Next, ask who heads up the association's local chapter, and find out if there is a student or resident contact in the area. If there are no chapters or representatives nearby, ask for the names of at least three local members of the association, including at least one resident. These contacts will be helpful in conducting informational interviews.