

# Tips on Choosing the Specialty That's Right for You

- **Where should you be in the specialty selection process right now?** Careers in Medicine (<http://www.aamc.org/students/cim/>) is a valuable resource. It divides specialty choice into four phases corresponding with the four years of medical school. Designed by the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) and the American Medical Association (AMA), this program is implemented on many medical school campuses.
- **What if you haven't narrowed your specialty choices at all?** The first step is self-assessment. Go to the Careers in Medicine Web site (<http://www.aamc.org/students/cim/>). Phase 1 includes self-evaluation tools to help you define your personality, values and goals. Once you've completed the exercises, you can begin thinking about which specialties complement your interests and goals.
- **Read How to Choose a Medical Specialty by Anita D. Taylor.** This book explores each of 24 board-certified specialties and subspecialties and may give you insight into which specialty is right for you.
- **Be sure to network with physicians in fields of interest.** Interviewing physicians about their lives, workloads and types of patients they see will help you better understand what a specialty is really all about.
- **Use each rotation to learn as much as you can about that particular specialty.** Keeping a journal will help you remember your experiences. As you begin each rotation write down your expectations and goals. What do you hope to do? What types of patients and illnesses do you hope/expect to see? What settings do you expect to work in? How many patients will you see in a day? As you go through the rotation, reconcile your expectations with what you actually experience. Also use your journal to keep track of your feelings. At the end of the rotation, summarize the things you learned about yourself. What challenged you the most? What were your biggest strengths and weaknesses? What did you enjoy the most? The answers will help you focus on the specialties that suit you best.
- **Identify a resident, attending physician and community physician from each rotation who inspire you.** To gain an insider's perspective of the specialty, ask these individuals the following questions: What do you like most about your specialty? What do you like least? What is your typical daily schedule? What skills or talents are most important for someone in your specialty? What advice do you have for a student interested in your specialty?
- **If you feel that you are lacking information on particular specialties, contact their professional organizations.** Specialty societies possess a vast amount of information and can usually provide you with numerous resources — whether you are looking for the answer to a specific question, statistical information, FAQs or if you just want to talk to a knowledgeable person. Find contact information for some of the major national specialty societies at link to section in Strolling
- **Find a good mentor.** Once your specialty choice is determined and you set your sights on the Match, it is extremely valuable to have a mentor to advise you. Your ideal mentor will be: 1) a physician in your specialty area; 2) someone who knows you well, 3) understands the Match process and, possibly, has connections at residency programs;

and 4) a person who – unlike an assigned advisor who may have many students to counsel – has time to spend with you. Initiating this relationship is as simple as approaching an individual and asking if he or she would be willing to advise you through the Match. By handpicking a mentor early on, you will be sure to have a great personal advocate and confidant throughout your fourth year.

- **Once you've completed and analyzed the self-assessment worksheets provided on the Careers in Medicine Web site, use this information to determine which specialties best match your values and goals.** Then consider taking the following steps:

1. **Set up time to discuss your findings with your mentor, a trusted advisor or role model.**

Ask any questions you might have about the different practice settings, work environments and specialties that you are considering. Talking to someone you respect can help you sort through your feelings, alleviate any confusion or misconceptions you might have, and help you determine what to do next.

2. **Go back to those physicians you interviewed in your specialties of interest and ask them any additional questions you might have.**

Use this opportunity to clarify possible career options and gather more information about work environments.

3. **Consider doing a fourth-year elective in a setting of interest with which you've had limited experience.**

For instance, if you're interested in working with underserved people in a rural area, do a rotation in a rural community. If you think you might want to be a big city doc, try to set up an elective in a large metro area.

4. **Put together a spreadsheet listing all the things that are most important to you in a career on one side and write the name of each specialty across the top.** Use the information you have gathered about each specialty to check which specialties have what you are looking for. For instance, if variety is important, check each specialty that offers a variety of patients and symptoms. Use this spreadsheet to compare and contrast the specialties.

- **If you are still having specialty choice anxiety, try this simple writing exercise.** For each specialty you are considering, write a personal statement. The ease or difficulty with which you do this could be a revealing indicator of the specialty that best suits your talents, needs and interests.

- **Set a goal to make your specialty choice by early July of your fourth year.** Setting July as a mental deadline for specialty choice ensures that you have plenty of time to acquire top-notch letters of recommendation, make the most of home or away rotations in your specialty area, and minimize the stress in your life.