

Common Questions and Answers

Electives Planning

NOTE: These advice nuggets have been developed over time. Many thanks to Dr. Dave Robinson and Dr. Jillian Horton for the original version of these nuggets.

1. Early electives – the pros and cons and cons and cons...

Many of you may be considering doing an “early elective” which can take place in August (after Period 7) in place of your summer vacation. For students applying to highly competitive specialties, this may be one way to get an elective at the program of your choice, make an early impression, and maybe get a reference letter in “prime time” (before CaRMS applications)

So, while it seems like a great idea, there are a number of drawbacks to consider before leaping in. Apart from the fact that there are a few special rules in place for this (e.g., you need to have passed all your NMBE exams - see the electives office for details), strategically, earlier is not always better. First, as this is only a two-week block, you may be a distant memory by the time CaRMS finally rolls around. Second, because it is still summer, some of the key folks you want to connect with or make an impression on may be hanging out at the cottage instead of the hospital. Finally, it's a very long time from January to August. Vacation time is hugely important to recharge and reconnect with friends and family after a busy 8 months and before embarking on the home stretch of medical school. If you do early electives, you will then take the 2 weeks of vacation in December right before the winter break. This is more than 11 months without a break.

2. How do I pick my electives?

Electives serve a number of functions, but the most important is improving your chances of matching to your chosen specialty. Are you committed to one specialty and willing to go anywhere (program-first)? Or are you more concerned about matching to a particular city(city-first)? Or are you somewhere in between? You'll first want to pick the top couple of programs (here or elsewhere) you want to match to and try to do those before CaRMS applications are due (prime time) at the end of November. Your chance of getting an interview is higher if you've done an elective and gotten a

strong reference letter from a given program. Don't worry if you're not 100% sure. One of the functions of electives is helping you decide if that's the career for you.

3. Physician, know thyself....

Self-assessment – really knowing and accepting your strengths and weaknesses - is key to knowing which specialties might be right for you.

Sometimes the idea of pursuing a particular specialty is what we are really in love with. Wouldn't it feel good to tell your high school math teacher you were a neurosurgeon? How about nasty Aunt Martha, who always said you wouldn't amount to anything? Be aware of these hidden influences, and remember that you are the one who has to live with the call schedule and the sacrifices inherent in whatever specialty you choose. Sometimes, who we really are is not the same as who we wish we were.

It's also critical to be realistic. Sometimes students fall in love with aspects of a particular specialty but are lacking in a required trait or skill that will allow them to really succeed in that area. For example, radiologists need to excel at spatial reasoning, otolaryngologists need depth perception (and ask for proof of it on their CaRMS applications), surgeons need dexterity and steady hands, and ER doctors need to be able to withstand the physiologic challenges of long-term shift work. This does not mean that you need to avoid certain areas if you have a disability which can be accommodated, but you do need to think about how your skills and abilities match with different areas of postgraduate training and, ultimately, medical practice.

What are your strengths and weaknesses? Be honest with yourself. How do they match up with the specialties you're considering? If you're not sure – ask some of your family or classmates... they may be able to add valuable insight. You can also make career counselling appointments with our career consultant to navigate the



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many self-knowledge career planning tools available through the Careers in Medicine website: <https://careersinmedicine.aamc.org/>

4. Using data for planning, strategizing, and reassuring

When planning for CaRMS you are going to get advice from lots of people. Some of this is going to be good, evidence-based advice, others will be of the “it worked for me” variety, and still others will be based on urban myths, rumours or other unfounded sources. What you can count on is that there are multiple strategies that can work, and that most students will find a match in their preferred discipline. CaRMS does collect data on strategies and how they’ve worked, and taking a look at that data can be reassuring and help you plan for your electives. Here’s a link to the most recent data published by CaRMS: <https://www.carms.ca/data-reports/r1-data-reports/>

You can look at this data for the disciplines that interest you, to get a really good idea of how important it is to do an elective in that discipline or in a particular location, and how much time in one discipline is “enough.” Remember- what worked for one student may not work for another, and every discipline is a little different. Look at the data and make a plan that you think can work for you!

5. Don’t smoke but get yourself a Matchbook.

The Canadian Federation of Medical Students, in association with CaRMS, puts together a Matchbook every year to inform students about the match, share perspectives of recently graduated medical students, and answer questions you may have. The matchbook is accessible here: <https://www.cfms.org/what-we-do/education/cfms-matchbook>. There is also great info from the CMA that is specialty-specific, and you can link to it from the matchbook site.

6. Demystifying the process

Get advice from the experts! The Association of Faculties of Medicine of Canada runs the electives process and has some great videos that can give you some good advice about the process and how to plan and bust some commonly held myths about how program directors think. So, instead of bingeing on Netflix tonight, why not explore some high-quality electives videos? Here are the links:

- [Demystifying the residency application](#)
- [Is there communication between program directors about applicants?](#)
- [Is there an elective and research strategy to be competitive?](#)
- [Are my odds better if I apply to the school where I did my studies?](#)
- [Should I have a “backup” discipline?](#)
- [Should I only apply to one discipline to make sure I get it?](#)
- [What if I take a leave of absence during medical school?](#)
- [Should I restrict the geographic area for my residency application?](#)

7. External electives – should you?

External electives allow you to explore alternate programs and different (possibly warmer!) cities. If you’re committed to a certain specialty or just desperate to leave Winnipeg, you’re certainly going to want to explore a couple of different universities. Even if you’re planning on never leaving Manitoba for training or practice, an

external elective can provide a unique perspective on how medicine is done elsewhere and help make you a better doctor. External electives aren’t mandatory (and some folks may not be able to swing one), but they’re a great opportunity if you can make it work.

For those of you open to moving, external electives are an important part of career planning. Time, money and rules around electives mean you can’t go everywhere. Decide on which would be your top one or two choices to match to and try to get electives in those programs. An elective will give you a much better view of the program and the people than any website or interview will do. It will also help showcase your talents and abilities to the program, so you’re more of a familiar face at interview time. If you’re interested in more than one specialty, consider doing back-to-back electives at the same place in different specialties. It will reduce your travel costs and make the transition smoother. Because some electives are competitive, don’t panic if you can’t get an elective at the exact program of your choice. Program directors know how hard it can be to fit everything in.

8. CanPrepp and social media

Developed during the pandemic when students could not do external electives, the CanPrepp site is a great resource to learn about schools you may visit on external electives, and those that you will not get a chance to see in person. They have descriptions, and often videos, of their programs and use the site to promote virtual events, like “Meet the PD,” which can be really helpful. As well, consider following programs that you are interested in on their social media- you can see what is important to them, and use that information to give them the best version of you that matches! CanPrepp can be found here: <https://canprepp.ca/>

9. Appointments

We are happy to meet to discuss any questions you have about electives. None of us are involved in R-1 residency selection (though some have been in the past). We will not tell program directors or other students what you are interested in (beyond general statements like “internal medicine is popular in your class”), so feel free to be honest with us about your ideas and concerns. Consider coming to see us for advice. While students are free to meet with any of the advisors, some may find it makes sense to speak with someone who specializes in the discipline that aligns with your interests. Our group currently has experience in:

- Pediatrics (Dr. Goldberg and Dr. Longstaffe)
- Internal Medicine (Dr. Saeed)
- Family Medicine (Dr. Wach)
- Psychiatry (Dr. Lazareck)
- Anesthesia (Dr. Jayas)

If you don’t see the discipline you’re interested in here, don’t worry- we are ready and able to give advice on all specialties. Do not hesitate to ask! You can make an appointment with us at StudentAffairsmed@umanitoba.ca.

Contact us at StudentAffairsmed@umanitoba.ca

We welcome feedback. Let us know if you find this document helpful or have tips to add!