



# MEDICAL-LEGAL

## Legal Guidelines in Interviewing Medical School Applicants

Daniel M. Avery, Jr., MD  
 Daniel M. Avery, III, MD  
 Justin G. Miller

Interviewing applicants for medical school is a very important function of the medical school education system. However, there are many questions that are not appropriate to ask applicants. While some would be useful to know, there are many one cannot ask, unless the applicant first brings them up.

In 1973, very few women applied to medical school and even professional schools as a whole. The following is a true story about a friend who applied to medical school.

### Case Study

A young woman in graduate school applied to medical school. During the interview, the woman was asked if she was married, and she responded, "Yes." She was then asked her age. But then the interviewer asked, "What if you were on call and you and your husband were having sex and the hospital called for you to come to the emergency room to attend one of your patients in cardiac arrest? What would you do?" The young woman responded, "I would go to the hospital like any physician." The young woman kept her cool. When the interview was over, the interviewer asked her how she felt about the interview. She replied, "Good, my uncle is the Dean of the Dental School and President of the University."

### Discussion

In 2010 one cannot ask these questions when interviewing prospective medical students. Table 1 lists the questions that cannot be asked in a medical school interview today. Some seem benign, such as, "How old are you?" which is usually found on

most applications. Some medical schools have established age limits on medical school applicants, based on the premise that if someone who is older completes medical school and residency, he or she will have less time to practice medicine and serve society. In "the old days," age did not matter. One of the authors had many in his medical school class in their 30s, ten in their 40s, and several in their 50s, one of whom was the class president. One is uncertain if age really matters.

At one time it was traditional – and *very honest* – to ask how an applicant planned to pay for medical school. This led to a discussion about loans and scholarships as well as the need for physicians in rural areas and the willingness for communities to offer stipends for a graduate to return to their area to practice medicine. Debts, credit, and difficulties thereof are not important.

Marital status used to be an important question because married students were thought to be more stable and mature. Their marital responsibilities mandated that they do well in school and not fail. Single students were thought to party more, although that is of doubtful importance.

One cannot ask about children. However, if brought up by the applicant, it could be discussed by the interviewer. "Are you pregnant or plan to get pregnant or have you ever had an abortion?" is not appropriate now or in the past. Along with the above, an individual's method of contraception should not be asked and certainly not whether they are sexually active. Today, that would be considered sexual abuse or at least sexual misconduct.

Religious beliefs should not be an issue in applying to medical school. What difference should it make? One's national-

**Table 1:** Things that cannot be asked in a medical school application interview

- How old are you?
- Where are you from?
- What nationality are you?
- Do you believe in God?
- Where do you go to church?
- What is your religious preference?
- What political party do you belong to?
- Why is your hair so long?
- Always had the ring in your nose?
- Do you have any tattoos?
- Do you have any learning disabilities?
- Do you do drugs?
- How much do you drink?
  
- How much money do you have in the bank?
- Ever declared bankruptcy?
- Ever defaulted on a loan?
- How do you plan to pay for medical school?
  
- Are you married?
- Do you have children?
- Are you pregnant or plan to get pregnant during medical school?
- Do you plan to get married in medical school?
- Are you living with someone?
- Have you ever been married?
- How old were you when you got married?
  
- Are you sexually active?
- Ever had sex with someone of your own sex?
- Are you gay?
- Are you on birth control pills?
- Method of contraception?
- Have you ever had an abortion?
- Do you have AIDS or any other STD?

ity begs the same question. However, there are many primary care residency and fellowship programs that are funded by state funds with a commitment to practice in that state. Where one is from may well be an issue as to where they plan to practice. Students from rural areas are more apt to return to rural areas. So, in this context, along with the tremendous need for care in those areas, it may be prudent to know where a student is from. Rural programs for medical clerkships, such as the TERM Program (Tuscaloosa Experience in Rural Medicine), require applicants to come from rural areas.

Sexual preference and experience also have no place in determining if an applicant would be a good medical student. Partying is not a question to ask. To the contrary, it would be useful to know if there was a drug or alcohol problem. With random and cause-and-effect drug screening for physicians and soon-to-be urine drug screens as a part of the application for hospital privileges, drug screening will eventually make its way to medical school applicants as well.

There are, however, issues of professionalism in how medical students present themselves to patients, and these are issues with the Liaison Committee for Medical Education (LCME) as well. Tattoos, inappropriate rings, and modern hair designs are to be discussed. **Patient perception and appreciation of students and their learning to meet patients are important.** Medical students, shadowing students, and pre-med students are required to meet patients with a professional appearance at the University of Alabama School of Medicine in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. To participate in its OB/GYN clerkship, no long hair or beards and no obvious rings or tattoos are allowed. Students who do not comb or brush their hair are asked to do so. The current trend of males to wet their hair, apply mousse or oil, and leave it standing up or unkempt is not appropriate.

### What Can You Ask?

Traditional important questions to ask applicants for medical school include: why does the individual want to become a physician, what medical experiences have they had that have stimulated their interest in medicine, and how have their academic performances been? Many of the above topics can be discussed if the applicant brings them up, such as marriage, children, and the church they attend. It is also appropriate to ask at what point in their life did they decide they wanted to go to medical school.

After my first orientation to interviewing applicants, I wondered if I should do any more than just introduce myself, to be on the safe side. My experience has found applicants who really did want to attend medical school and others who did not. One young woman really wanted to get married and have children, not go to medical school. There are some who felt that it was the right thing to do, but uncertain if it was right for them. But there are many that have worked very hard to get to this point in the process and will make wonderful physicians.

---

*Daniel M. Avery, Jr., MD, is Associate Professor, Department of Obstetrics & Gynecology, College of Community Health Services, University of Alabama School of Medicine, in Tuscaloosa.*

---

*Daniel M Avery, III, MD, received a Bachelor of Science in Biomedical Sciences from Auburn University. Dr. Avery graduated from the University of Alabama School of Medicine in May 2010.*

---

*Justin G. Miller is a fourth year medical student at Tulane University in New Orleans. He plans a career in general surgery.*

---

*Potential Financial Conflicts of Interest: By AJCM® policy, all authors are required to disclose any and all commercial, financial, and other relationships in any way related to the subject of this article that might create any potential conflict of interest. The authors have stated that no such relationships exist.*