June 29, 2020

An Open Letter to MCAT® Examinees

For those of you who want to attend medical school in fall 2021, this has been a particularly tough and frustrating year.

Preparing for the Medical College Admission Test® (MCAT®) and applying to medical school is a demanding, intensive, multiyear process. The process carries so much impact on your lives and career aspirations that it understandably weighs heavily on your minds and can take a physical toll as well. So much is already uncertain — “How will I do on the MCAT exam?” “Will I be able to get into my preferred schools?” — and this year has been even more difficult.

As the creator and administrator of the MCAT exam, the AAMC (Association of American Medical Colleges) has made it our priority to respond and adjust to the unprecedented events of these past few months. The COVID-19 pandemic led the AAMC to cancel eight test dates this spring, which was necessary to protect the health and safety of examinees, causing many to postpone their exams until summer or fall. Even now uncertainty remains, as the pandemic continues its grip on our nation, with concerns that already rescheduled exam dates may need to be postponed yet again.

On top of these already distressing conditions, we are angered and alarmed by continued racial injustice in the United States and by the tragic deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks, and others. Many have found it understandably harder to focus and study for exams during this time of great anxiety and emotional pain.

The AAMC and the nation’s medical schools understand that every potential applicant to medical school is experiencing challenges that no one could have anticipated. We are writing to acknowledge those challenges and express our commitment to supporting the needs of medical schools and the students applying to them.

First, it’s important to know that each medical school carefully determines its own admission requirements, including whether it will require MCAT scores. The MCAT exam is an important and validated predictor of success in medical school. As a result, even during this difficult year, most medical schools have indicated they will consider MCAT scores in the admission process.

As the broad scope and impact of the pandemic became clear earlier this year, it also became clear that the MCAT exam could not be offered under state and local stay-at-home orders and not until health and safety precautions were in place to protect examinees once testing centers reopened.
We carefully considered the option of remote testing and concluded that it could not be an option without jeopardizing the integrity and fairness of the test. As some 20% of households do not have regular access to high-speed internet, an online option would create an immense disadvantage for many examinees. Additionally, given the high-stakes nature of the MCAT exam, its secure delivery at brick-and-mortar locations with in-person proctors is an important element of its reliability.

To make up for the lost time, we worked to increase the number of testing opportunities when test centers were permitted to reopen. We restructured the test and reduced its length from nearly eight hours to five hours and 45 minutes by removing some administrative and unscored content — while testing the same knowledge and skills and reporting the same scores with the same precision. The shorter exam means our testing partner can offer 50% more opportunities to test, albeit with some of those times beginning very early in the morning or continuing until late at night. Offering more dates and times allows examinees to be socially distant during the exam and have more flexibility to test when they feel ready.

Anyone who wants to sit for the exam should be able to get a seat, though we acknowledge that the seat may not always be for the preferred time or location.

We know these adjustments are less than ideal. We are nonetheless working hard to make what improvements can be made amid difficult circumstances.

Specifically:

- Test dates are available through late September, and we will expedite score reporting for all remaining 2020 test dates to get scores into applications sooner.

- From our weekly conversations with members of the admissions community, we know many medical schools are being flexible about reviewing applications that do not yet include test scores. According to a recent survey of AAMC-member institutions, nearly 70% of responding schools have adjusted their application deadlines for 2021 admissions or are considering adjusting them. A similar percentage said they will accept or are considering accepting scores from dates later in the testing calendar. Many medical schools will screen or interview applicants without MCAT scores.

- We continue to encourage the use of holistic review in admissions, which is used by an estimated 90% of our member medical schools. This means looking beyond MCAT scores to consider the whole applicant and putting MCAT scores and grades in the context of applicants’ attributes, access to educational and enrichment opportunities, and lived experiences.

- We apologize for not delivering an efficient rescheduling process for many examinees. We’re working with our testing partner to provide examinees with better customer service, especially during registration and rescheduling, to reduce the backlog of
examinees who have been awaiting assistance — including helping those who have been approved for accommodations. We’ve also removed all fees for examinees who wish to change their test date or location during the pandemic.

• We expanded eligibility for the AAMC’s fee assistance program so applicants with economic need can prepare for and take the MCAT exam and apply to medical schools. The AAMC also collaborated with the Khan Academy to offer free resources to help all applicants prepare for the MCAT exam — and we have worked with the Khan Academy to make sure these materials remain available for free.

• Lastly, we recognize the need to communicate with applicants more clearly, and more often, so applicants feel heard and so the rationale behind our decisions is clear.

Despite these changes, 2020 will remain a challenging year for medical school applicants. The pandemic and its impact on our lives is far from over, and your fortitude and perseverance are qualities that will serve you well on your path to becoming a physician. The AAMC is committed to doing what we can to support applicants on the journey to medical school and to provide equitable opportunities for all future physicians.

As the pandemic has shown, our country needs more physicians and a more diverse physician workforce — now more than ever — to increase access to care, eliminate health care inequities, and improve the health of people everywhere.

We wish you great success and thank you for your patience during these challenging times.

Sincerely,

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