

Roadmap to Choosing a Medical Specialty

Questions to Consider

Question	Explanation	Examples
<i>What are your areas of scientific/clinical interest?</i>	What organ system or group of diseases do you find most exciting? Which clinical questions do you find most intriguing?	Pharmacology & Physiology → Anesthesia Anatomy → Surgical Specialty, Radiology Neuroscience → Neurology, Neurosurgery
<i>Do you prefer a surgical, medical, or a mixed specialty?</i>	Do you prefer a specialty that is more procedure-oriented or one that emphasizes patient relationships and clinical reasoning?	Surgical → Orthopedics, Plastics, Neurosurgery Mixed → ENT, Ob/Gyn, EMed, Anesthesia Medical → Internal Medicine, Neurology, Psychiatry See more on the academic advising website.
<i>What types of activities do you want to engage in?</i>	Choose a specialty that will allow you to pursue your non-medical interests, like research, teaching or policy work.	Your activity options will be determined by your practice setting & the time constraints of your specialty. Look at the activities physicians from each specialty engage in.
<i>How much patient contact and continuity do you prefer?</i>	Do you like talking to patients & forming relationships with them? What type of physical interaction do you want with your patients?	Internal & Family Medicine mean long-term patient relationships. Radiology & Pathology have basically no patient contact. Anesthesiologists & EMed docs have brief and efficient patient interactions.
<i>What type of patient population would you like to work with?</i>	Look at the typical patient populations in each specialty you're considering. What type of physician-patient relationship do you want?	Oncologists have patients with life-threatening diseases. Pediatricians may deal with demanding parents as well as sick infants and children.
<i>How important is work/life balance?</i>	What kind of hours do you want to work? Would you prefer shift work or to have weekends off? How much call are you willing to take?	If you want control over the number of hours you work, consider specialties like Radiology, Dermatology, Pathology, EMed, Anesthesia, Ophthalmology, PM&R and Neurology.
<i>How important is earning potential?</i>	With the high cost of medical education, financial reimbursement is an important factor for many medical students.	As a general rule, surgical specialties tend to be more highly compensated than medical specialties. Please visit the academic advising website for the full document, including a list of salaries by specialty.

Portions adapted from: *The Ultimate Guide to Choosing a Medical Specialty*, 2013, Brian Freeman MD

Developed by Alissa Totman for Stanford School of Medicine Academic Advising & the Office of Medical Student Wellness, Spring 2015

How to Explore your Interests

Preclinical Years

Consider one or two of the following:

- Talk to your advising dean
<https://med.stanford.edu/md/academic-support/academic-advising.html>
- Attend student interest group events
http://web.stanford.edu/group/smsa/cgi-bin/public/view_groups.php
- Engage in clinical research
<http://med.stanford.edu/medscholars.html>
- Seek out a faculty or alumni mentor
<http://med.stanford.edu/e4c.html>
<http://med.stanford.edu/alumni.html>
- Seek out shadowing experiences
- Visit the School of Medicine Career Center
<http://med.stanford.edu/careercenter/>
- Take the AAMC Careers in Medicine self assessment
<https://www.aamc.org/cim/>
- Talk to residency program directors
http://med.stanford.edu/gme/programs/documents/Program_Contacts_MASTER.pdf
- Attend grand rounds
- Join the national professional associations for potential specialties
- Check out the medical journals of potential specialties
- Read a book – these were written to help you choose a specialty:
[*The Ultimate Guide to Choosing a Medical Specialty*](#), by Brian S. Freeman, MD
[*How to Choose a Medical Specialty*](#), by Anita D. Taylor
[*On Becoming a Doctor*](#), by Tania Heller, MD

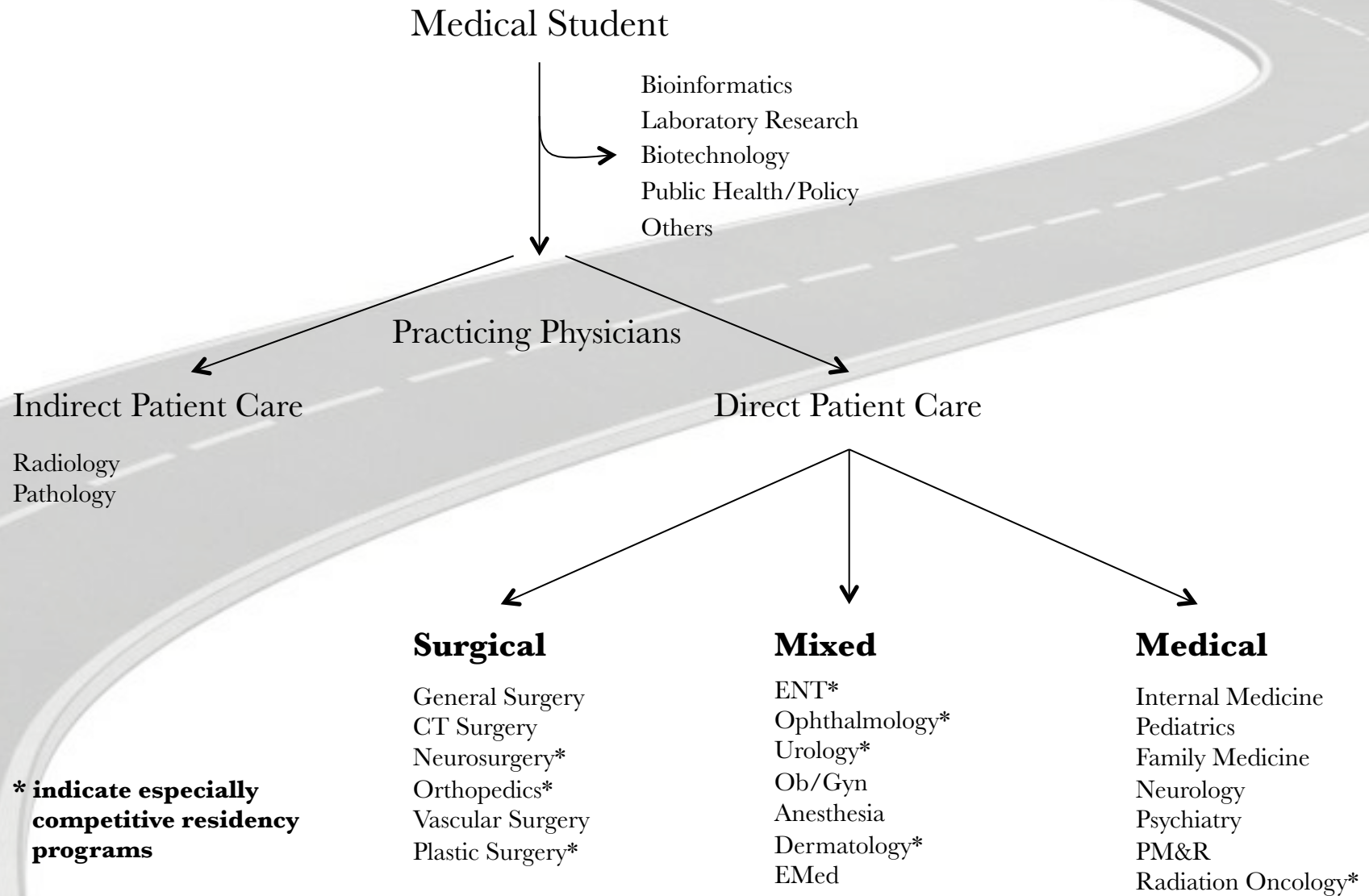
Clinical Rotations

- Talk in depth with your attending physicians and residents – ask the tough questions
- Try to get a sense of the culture in each specialty
- Think about whether you can see yourself fitting in there
- Take notes in a journal on your impressions from your clinical rotations

For more information visit the Stanford Academic Advising website: <https://med.stanford.edu/md/academic-support/academic-advising.html>

A Career in Medicine Algorithm

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The Numbers: Average Compensation & Years of Residency Training

Specialty	Median Compensation	Years of Residency Training
Neurosurgery	\$548,186	6*
Orthopedic surgery	\$476,083	5*
Radiology	\$438,115	5
Radiation oncology	\$413,518	5
Plastic Surgery	\$388,929	6
Anesthesiology	\$366,640	4
ENT	\$365,171	5
Dermatology	\$350,627	4
General Surgery	\$340,000	5*
Ophthalmology	\$325,384	4
Obstetrics and gynecology	\$294,190	4
Pathology	\$285,173	4
Emergency medicine	\$267,293	3-4
Physical medicine & rehabilitation	\$236,800	4
Neurology	\$236,500	4
Psychiatry	\$208,462	4
Internal medicine	\$205,441	3
Pediatrics	\$202,832	3
Family medicine	\$197,655	3

***an additional 1-2 years of research may be required at some programs**

Source: *The Ultimate Guide to Choosing a Medical Specialty*, 2013, Brian Freeman MD