

Alka Kamat- Reasons For Aspiring To A Career in Medicine

“Why do you want to be a doctor? Doctors work extreme hours, first as students, then as professionals.”

That was our family doctor after I announced my plans to be a doctor.

During middle school, I got decent grades in sciences, maths, and medals in basketball. I was analytical and logical with a little artistic bend.

In 2015, I attended Thalassemia Day at Red Cross. Looking at a kid undergoing blood transfusion, I felt an inner need to help him. As I read about thalassemia, my interest in biology grew. Over the next years, I regularly volunteered on Thalassemia Day.

Then came the turning point. In our senior summer, my twin sister, Uma, and I co-founded eSymptoms.info, as we stumbled upon the need for easy-to-understand disease education to masses.

The discovery came while traversing through Florida in 2015. Hearing about Zika outbreak, I went through CDC, WHO websites. Uma, an art student, felt these sites were too technical. If we, IB students, found them confusing, what about an ordinary person? Could disease information be made easy-to-understand? So, Uma made an illustrative “Stop Zika in India” brochure in the Marathi language, for the sophomore project. She found paper and pdf brochures challenging to share.

That sophomore summer, we combined my medicine and Uma’s illustrations passions, to provide disease information in easy-to-understand, easy-to-share format. I understood that digital images rule the social apps due to its ease of sharing. So I suggested to Uma to convert the brochure into three digital images - prevention, symptoms, and id. We called it MedCards. MedCards are illustrated images of disease information, in native languages, shareable on social media. We put them on our eSymptoms.info website.

Then we sought feedback from Dr. Ratta, a telemedicine expert. He suggested focusing on mosquito vector diseases given India’s challenge. He encouraged us to submit an abstract on MedCards to International Telemedicon 2017. Our paper, “A Social Media Site for Lightning Distribution of Medical Information” received the “Best Social Responsibility Student Paper” award. Presenting to the audience of doctors was exhilarating. But most importantly, eSymptoms.info is our way of changing world!

This experience sealed my decision. I realized that I need to be a doctor. But feelings are different than transcripts, scores and competitive realities. My grades have been decent. A bit more focus made my grades even better in my junior year.

Next, I wanted to check how I will react to blood, flesh and 3-4 hours of standing during the surgery. I started to look for real-life experience. Having volunteered in Thalassemia Day, Indian Red Cross, Pune offered me an internship in its Thalassemia Ward for two weeks. I got to follow end-to-end transfusions.

For my IB extended essay, I decided to leverage my internship at Thalassemia ward. After researching, I chose to explore “Does the consanguinity practices in a community, genetically predisposed it to Thalassemia?” I created a questionnaire for thalassaemic patients and their parents. I worked on how to bring this delicate question. I got answers from all 42 patients.

I loved this medical research experience so much that I may choose the physician-scientist path. That should not have come as a surprise. Both of my grandparents and my father are PhDs. So research is in my genes. It has been instead my secret weapon!

Confident about clinics, I requested Dr. Ratta opportunity to shadow him. Next few weeks, I followed him during patient consultations, diagnosis, lab confirmation, treatment options communication to patient family, planning, surgery, and post-surgery follow up. I felt natural in surgery halls. I loved the logical diagnostic and corrective treatment decision making.

So why do I want to be a doctor, though it's a hard life? For me, it is an inner need to be compassionate. I still don't fully understand it. I can relate it to Robert Frost's words.

"Woods are lovely, dark and deep,

But I have promises to keep,

And miles to go before I sleep."