

I Didn't Get In... Now What?

How Queen's students rebounded from the dreaded rejection letter



Graham Skelhorne-Gross (*PhD '14 Pathology and Molecular Medicine*) is going into his third year at Queen's Medical School. But before he became a medical student, he lived through the same experience that many applicants go through – he was rejected from medical school.

According to Sandra Banner, the Executive Director of CaRMS (Canadian Residency Matching Service), less than 30% of students receive an acceptance the first time they apply. Like numerous other students, Graham didn't even receive an interview the first time he applied at the end of his master's degree in 2010.

"When you've worked on something for so long, and you've wanted it for 4 years, it's really tough getting rejected," Graham recalled of the rejection, "you put a lot of effort into the application process so it's disappointing." Because he also had a strong interest in his research, he chose to continue his studies and finished a PhD in pathology and molecular medicine.

What helped Graham get over the disappointment was putting things in perspective. A lot of great applicants don't get offers or even interviews," he said. Critically reflecting on your application helps as well – Graham asked himself if he was as competitive as he thought he was. "It wasn't surprising," he said, "I knew that one section of my MCAT scores was lower than average."

It was a similar situation for another medical school hopeful, **Peter Su** (*BScN '14 Nursing*). When Peter was rejected from medical school in 2012, it was a confirmation of what he already knew from his critical self-reflection. "In my last year, I knew I wouldn't be able to get into medical school but applied anyway," he said, "my grades were great, but I

just couldn't get a high enough MCAT score, even after multiple attempts, taking prep courses, and using various study guides."

For Peter, it had been his goal since high school to become a doctor. "I thought it would be an interesting and rewarding career where I got to literally 'run around saving people' in the ER – kind of like being a super hero!" he said, "but in all honesty, I truly wanted to make a difference by helping others in obtaining the most essential and basic thing necessary in life – good health."

Like Graham, Peter chose to continue his education with the intention to reapply one day. "With a burning desire to continue pursuing this career path," he said, "I decided to apply to nursing programs thinking it would give me great exposure and insight into healthcare." Upon graduation from Queen's with a degree in life sciences, he decided to stay, and enrolled in Queen's Advanced Standing Track (AST) nursing program.

Although both Graham and Peter entered into further education with the intention to reapply to medical school, only Graham ended up actually doing so. Three years after the initial rejection, Graham pulled up his bootstraps and reapplied, knowing in his heart that medical school was what he wanted.

"I wanted to look back and not regret not reapplying and giving my whole effort," he said. Experiencing the serious impact of his mother's cancer firsthand gave him motivation to continue the pursuit of becoming a physician. As well, being a physician was the end goal that combined all his interests: biology, research, people, teamwork, and leadership.

Instead of trying to improve everything, he reflected on his application and focused on weaker areas – his GPA and his verbal score on the MCATs. He believed that, “the difference between those applicants that reapply and don’t get accepted year after year, and those that eventually get accepted, is that those accepted

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–PETER SU

are consistently working on improving their application and the competitiveness.” Because the application is a yearlong process, it is easy to fall into a trap of playing the “waiting game” during the year.

For Graham, the dream that he had worked towards for six years finally came true, when another letter came in the mail– this time, an acceptance letter. He started attending Queen’s medical school in fall 2014. Of his journey, Graham noted, “you might think that you’ll be most proud of the accomplishment of being accepted, but looking back, what I am most proud of are those moments when I didn’t give up.”

As for Peter, after only one semester of nursing school, he discovered a career that was much more suited to his own interests. Wanting to both build real, trusting relationships with people and provide the basic necessity of good health, Peter originally thought the only option was medical school.

“At the time, I thought the only way to do this was by becoming a doctor, but I was wrong. I fell in love with nursing!” he said.

“I gained a whole new appreciation for the profession and realized that what nurses do was actually much closer to what I wanted from medicine.” The human aspect of nursing was what drew Peter to the career. “[Families] are always so appreciative when I take

the extra few minutes to calm their nerves and address their concerns, something doctors do not always have the time to do,” he said. On top of the interaction with patients, Peter also notes that many skills that he thought were performed solely by doctors are actually performed by nurses, such as injections, wound dressings, and blood transfusions.

Learning from his experience, he urges other medical school hopefuls to reflect

on their decisions. “I think there are too many students who put so much pressure on themselves to get into medical school and don’t consider other options,” he said.

Graham’s and Peter’s stories are just two of many stories of rejected medical school applicants who go on to find highly rewarding careers in and outside of clinical settings. While both Graham and Peter chose to stay in healthcare, not all those who get rejected do.

continued



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Some, like Zoe Robinson and Lyon Charow, went on to find different but equally satisfying careers.

After being rejected from medical school as an undergrad at Queen's, **Zoe Robinson (BAH '91 Sociology)** initially completed her graduate studies with the idea of reapplying down the road. "Instead," she says, "I studied Regulatory Law Administration and worked for 18 years as an advocate for injured workers, fighting to get them the benefits to which they were entitled." She notes that while it is light years away from where she had initially planned to be, she found herself "a highly personally rewarding career."

Lyon Charow (BScH '13 Life Science) originally wanted to become an orthodontist, but after over 20 unsuccessful applications to dental schools in Canada and the United States, he decided to consider other options. Encouraged by his parents to consider a career in business, Lyon applied to Royal Bank

of Canada's Career Launch program that rotates participants through various roles in a bank.

"Out of 5000 applicants, I became 1 of the 100 chosen across Canada," he said. Today, he is able to use analytical skills from his science background to problem solve in various situations in the program. "Despite not fulfilling my original plan, I'm very satisfied with the choices I've made and I'm glad that I'm now working for RBC."

Medical school is one of many options, as these Queen's graduates have demonstrated. While Peter, Zoe, and Lyon, like so many others, didn't end up becoming physicians, they found the careers that they were actually looking for in the process: ones that had all the elements of what they originally wanted out of medicine and more. Regardless of whether your rejection reaffirms your decision to become a physician like Graham, or becomes a blessing in disguise as you

discover other options like Peter, Zoe, and Lyon, a rejection from medical school is a chance to reflect and explore a variety of options.

"I am so lucky to have made this decision," Peter said. "[Students] need to pause, take some time, and think: why do I want to be a doctor? What do I want in my future career? Are there other paths and options that can get me what I want?" And, he adds with the confidence of one who has experienced, and flourished after rejection: "I promise ... there will definitely be more than one!"

If you are considering your options or need help with strategy for applications, come to drop-in career advising, make a 1-1 appointment with a career counsellor, or attend one of our Further Education workshops.

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