Studying Medicine in Germany
Medical students learn everything about diseases and how to treat them

An article by Florian Schumann

That is what it's about
"Being a doctor is more than a job," says Heyo Kroemer, a professor at the University of Göttingen and President of the Medical Faculty: "People entrust you with their most valuable possession: their health." Medical students study the causes of diseases and possible treatments. The state of knowledge is constantly changing. "Today, you can cure certain types of leukaemia with the contents of a plastic bag," says Kroemer. He refers to a new immunotherapy in which defence cells are genetically engineered to attack cancer cells. The immune cells are administered to the patient from an infusion bag. Such methods have only become possible because of the increasing understanding of how diseases arise at the molecular level. This new kind of knowledge is just as much a part of medical studies as it is a classic skill, for example, to ask questions about a patient’s history or to thoroughly examine them. With a degree in medicine you have many options. You can do night duty in intensive care, open a paediatric practice or even work as a radiologist.

This is how the course runs
Medical school usually takes 13 semesters. The first part of the study, the “pre-clinic”, deals with scientific fundamentals such as physiology, anatomy and biochemistry. There are also laboratory internships and a dissection course, during which students learn about how the body is structured using corpses. After the first medical examination after four semesters, the clinical section follows with 21 disciplines (from general medicine to surgery) and 14 interdisciplinary topics such as rehabilitation and epidemiology. During the semester break students do internships for a total of four months. Most universities try to break the distinction between (theoretical) preclinical and (practical) clinical practice and to get students in contact with patients from an early stage. These efforts are particularly wide-ranging in model study programs, for example in Berlin, Aachen or Augsburg. The second medical exam follows after five years. In the final year of study, the Practical Year, students work at a hospital or in a practice. This is followed by an oral-practical exam. The specialist training after graduation lasts another five to seven years.

Typical questions raised within the subject
- How are body cells structured, and what functions do they take on?
- Which arteries branch off from the aorta?
- What are typical symptoms of a heart attack?
- Which diagnoses are suitable for pelvic pain?
- How do you explain a diagnosis to a patient and come to a therapeutic decision together?
- How do you treat a child with scarlet fever?
- How do you read a scientific study, and what conclusions do you draw from it for practical application?
The subject suits you...

...if you have a great interest in the human body, are interested in people and can communicate well. In addition, you should be willing to work: "Especially at the beginning, medical students have to remember a lot," says Kroemer. While other students often only have exams at the end of a semester, medical students have examinations before that. But there are hardly students drop out. "Most people know what they're getting into," says Kroemer. And: "The course is not impossible" When it comes to learning, those who have been good at science at school have an advantage. Some universities offer bridging courses to help make the initiation into chemistry and biology easier.

Is there a numerus clausus?

The numerus clausus is usually in the highest grade area. At present, admissions are being reformed.