So you’re looking at buying your first Stethoscope...

Stethoscopes are arguably seen as the symbol of membership of the medical profession. They are an examination tool that is utilised by almost all specialties and are often employed in patient consultations on a daily basis. Unlike many other medical examination devices, stethoscopes are not generally shared amongst colleagues. For this reason, you want to make sure that you have a brand and model of stethoscope that serves you well, during your medical training. Having said that, you don’t necessarily want to “break-the-bank” on a student budget, so practicality is often of greater importance than prestige.

The following guide is written to assist you with your first purchase, from the point of view of a fellow medical colleague. I have happily used both a budget stethoscope and a top-of-the-line cardiology stethoscope, from different brands, in my training. It is important to recognise that the top-of-the-line stethoscopes are only of value if you absolutely must have auscultation quality as part of your future speciality; keeping in mind that you can always upgrade later.

Starting off at UQ, you may wish to look at the stock at the University’s Co-op Bookstore - www.coop.com.au, especially since you can actually inspect the models and see if you like them. There are also numerous online stores, including www.medshop.com.au, so for those students comfortable with online purchases, this option can save you some money. You will find a range of stethoscopes, with the Littman brand dominating in terms of models. The Co-op shop also stocks a budget brand called Element, the upper end of models of which would be suitable for medical students:

Models and Brands to AVOID - Any stethoscope around the 30 AUD mark is probably inadequate for medical students, in terms of its quality for interpretation of heart sounds and murmurs. These are often considered disposable stethoscopes for use in clinics. A general observation is that these stethoscopes have very thin, flat diaphragm housings, made of cheap aluminium. They are quite light-weight, which is a plus, but don’t be surprised if the sound amplification is lower and some sound qualities are indistinguishable. This might be fine as a first stethoscope to get you started, but you will invariably dispose of one of these down the track.
**Base Models** – You can find reasonable stethoscopes from around 50 – 150 AUD, available from Littman, Welch Allyn and even cheaper brands, such as Element. Most of these stethoscopes have two sides to the diaphragm housing at the end – One side has a flat contact plate (the diaphragm) and the other side has a concave open bowl (the bell). You usually turn the housing to switch between diaphragms and bells, to listen to high or low pitched sounds, respectively.

- My first stethoscope was a Welch Allyn Adult Professional Stethoscope, available from MedShop for 85 AUD and I used this successfully for more than ten years
- Spirit CK-601CP Classic Stethoscopes are of acceptable quality, featuring a traditional adult diaphragm and bell, selling at 53 AUD from MedShop
- The 3M Littmann Classic II SE stethoscope is one of the most popular Littman stethoscopes, at 135 AUD for members at Coop.

**Middle Range Stethoscopes** – The next range of stethoscopes cost anywhere between 120 and 210 AUD. They often feature a more rigid “joining” piece near the point where the ear tubings meet (forming a triangle), dual channel tubing for separate left and right acoustic clarity, and frequently have a more advanced “tunable” diaphragm, which act as a both diaphragm and a bell, depending on the amount of pressure you apply. Ear pieces are generally softer and more ergonomic than cheaper models. Note that “Master” stethoscopes in the Littmann lines usually have only one side to the diaphragm assembly.

- 3M Littmann Master Classic II stethoscopes have a single channel, with a single adult tunable diaphragm on one side, selling for 140 AUD for members at Coop
- 3M Littmann Classic III stethoscopes have a single channel, with a dual (adult and paediatric) diaphragms, both of which are tunable, selling for 119 to 132 AUD at MedShop and 147 to 162 AUD for members at Coop, depending on the colour (not sure why this is the case, but it looks like you pay extra for black-coloured metal components). The paediatric diaphragm can also be replaced with a rubber gasket to form a traditional bell if you so wish.
- Spirit CK-747 CP Cardiology Stethoscopes offer an entry level, value for money, cardiology stethoscope with dual channels, non-tunable adult and paediatric diaphragms (with the option to convert the paediatric side to a traditional bell), selling for 158 AUD at MedShop
- Welch Allyn Harvey Elite stethoscopes have dual channels, with non-tunable dual adult and paediatric diaphragms (with the option to convert the paediatric side to a traditional bell), selling for around 200 AUD at MedShop

**Higher End Cardiology Stethoscopes** – Cardiology Stethoscopes almost always have dual channel tubing, as well as tunable diaphragms, and have higher quality components to deliver better acoustics. These range from 150 to over 300 AUD. Generally speaking, you do not need cardiology stethoscopes for most auscultation tasks as a medical student. However, if you only plan on buying one stethoscope for many years, you may want to ask some family members to pitch-in for a lovely gift.

- 3M Littmann Cardiology III stethoscopes have dual channel and dual tunable diaphragms (adult and paediatric) and are available for 212 to 232 AUD from MedShop and 225 AUD for members at Coop.
3M Littmann Cardiology IV stethoscopes apparently have better acoustics, stain resistance and durability, have dual channel and dual tunable diaphragms (adult and paediatric). These are available for 299 to 321 AUD for members at Coop and 256 to 285 AUD at MedShop.

The 3M Littmann Master Cardiology Stethoscope was my second stethoscope, which I bought after several years a doctor (and claimed some of the cost in my tax return!). It has a dual channel, single-sided adult-sized tunable diaphragm and has very good acoustic properties. This sells for 225 to 240 AUD at MedShop and 311 to 341 AUD for members at Coop (I believe I bought mine on promotion years ago).

For students with hearing difficulties – There are digital electronic stethoscopes which enable amplification of the sound from the diaphragm. I am unsure how the stethoscopes compare in terms of battery life, sound quality or durability, however there are several options on the market.

- Spirit CK-E-600A Digital Stethoscopes are available for 255 AUD from MedShop
- 3M Littmann Digital Electronic Stethoscope 3200BU, is a single sided adult digital stethoscope and sells for 570 AUD from MedShop and 720 AUD for members at Coop.

I hope you enjoy your first year in the MD Program.

Sincerely,

Dr Dan Park
Lecturer in Clinical Practice, Course Coordinator, Year 1 Clinical Practice
On behalf of the Phase 1 Clinical Practice Team

Note: The author of this document has no affiliation with the manufacturers or resellers of the stethoscopes listed above. Students are encouraged to ask questions and source products that are right for them. Prices listed above are estimates, based on web publications, current on 12 January 2017. The opinions listed in this guide do not constitute any official stance from the University of Queensland nor its affiliates.