

Guidelines for getting the most out of your clinical shadowing experiences

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Among the most important choices in life is that of a career and life's work. This single choice is influenced by one's values, aspirations, self-assessments, and personal expectations, as well as evaluations of the uncertainties and costs—time and money—on one's personal and family life. The choice of a career in health care is all of that! It is, in a word, complex.

In order to learn *what it's like* to be a clinical health care professional, you should observe *how clinicians in your intended field spend their days and how they approach their work*.

We suggest that you pay attention to the following logistical factors in the work of the clinicians you observe. How do they:

- Allow time for the unexpected?
- Stay current in the profession?
- Address uncertainty?
- Integrate personal and professional life?

We also encourage you to think deeply about the example each clinician sets for their approach to caring for patients. After each shadowing experience, consider the following questions:

- What did I learn from observing interactions with the patient about:
 - The patient's illness?
 - What is going on in the patient's life that may have importance in dealing with the illness?
 - The clinician-patient relationship?
 - The importance of spending enough time?
 - The importance of engaged listening without interruption?
 - How the healthcare provider reasons and makes decisions?
- What did I learn, not only *about* the patient, but *from* the patient? What did the patient teach me?
- What did I learn about what it's *really* like to be a clinician?

A broad question for you to consider after each shadowing experience is, *What did I learn?* There a lot to learn from clinicians, from the patients, and from the patients' families. Experienced clinicians know that patients and families are important teachers.

If the clinician whom you are shadowing is open to sitting down with you to discuss the above matters at the end of your shadowing day, you can gain additional insights. You may want to share these guidelines at the beginning of your shadowing experience so that you may have shared goals. Most professionals appreciate the opportunity to reflect and teach.

We suggest that you keep a journal of your experiences and reflections. Writing down observations and reflections is a valuable way to process your learning experiences and to keep records in preparation for the application process.

How Do I Shadow a Doctor?

Shadowing a doctor is a great way to find out if a career in medicine might be right for you. It'll give you a better understanding of what a doctor's typical day is like, and may give you good experience to talk about in your applications and interviews for medical school. It's also a great way to gain familiarity with the vast number of different medical and research environments, as well as specialties.

How do I find a doctor to shadow?

If you have a relationship with your own doctor, or know any doctors, start by asking them. Likely, this will be your strongest and best resource to find a shadowing opportunity. You can also ask your teachers, professors, and pre-med or academic advisors if they know any doctors that other students have shadowed in the past. If you're in college, leverage any relationships your school may have with a medical school or hospital on campus. It's also okay to contact hospitals through their volunteer office, or search online for local doctors with specialties that interest you. Call their office or email them at least a few weeks before you'd like to begin shadowing.

How should I ask them?

Express why you want to shadow this person specifically. Maybe someone recommended them or maybe they practice a specialty that interests you. Briefly tell them where you go to school, any medical or research experiences you've had, and your goals. Be courteous and professional. Many doctors welcome opportunities to talk to students, so if you get turned down, ask other doctors.

How long should I shadow?

Arrange something that fits both the doctor's schedule and your level of interest. You may only want to spend one day with them, or you may want to shadow a few hours a week for several weeks or months. If you have the time in the summer or over a break, you may want to shadow full time for an entire week. Find out what the doctor is comfortable with or what has worked well in the past.

What should I wear and what should I bring?

Dress professionally and comfortably: dress pants and a tie for men, dress pants or a dress for women, and closed-toed shoes you can walk in all day. Bring a notebook. Ask questions and take notes in between patients, not in front of them, and prepare some questions ahead of time.

Should I talk to patients?

The doctor is required to introduce you to each patient and explain that you are a pre-medical student, so expect to talk to patients. Some people may be uncomfortable having you in the room during an examination or the entire appointment, so you may be asked to step out. Other patients may ask you questions about yourself, school or your plans to become a doctor. In either case, it's important that you keep all patient information private. You may be required to sign a HIPAA compliance document stating that you will not disclose any patient information or details that could lead to patient identification.

What should I do afterwards?

Write a thank you note to give the doctor on your last day that thanks them for their time. If you think it went well, ask for a letter of recommendation right away. Don't wait until you need it because the experience may not be fresh in the doctor's mind by that time. Reflect on what you've learned from your shadowing experience and write down anything you may want to remind yourself of when you're writing your personal statements for medical school.

FOR MORE INFORMATION PLEASE VISIT:

KevinMD.com: www.kevinmd.com/blog/2010/06/tips-students-shadow-doctors.html