

Guidelines for getting the most out of the doctor “shadowing” experience

Among the most important choices in life is that of a career and life’s work. In this single choice are combined one’s values and aspirations, one’s self expectations and assessment of talents, uncertainty, consideration of costs—time and money, and concern about how the choice will have an impact on one’s personal and family life. The choice of a career in health care is all of that, and is, in a word, complex.

In order to get the most out of your doctor “shadowing” experience and learning *what it’s like* to be a physician, dentist, or other health care professional, you need to learn not only what the professional with whom you’ll be spending time does all day, but also how he or she:

- organizes the day;
- allows time for the unexpected;
- stays current in the profession;
- addresses uncertainty;
- integrates personal and professional life;
- and other issues.

There’s a lot to learn, both from the professional and from the patients, as well as from the patients’ families (or their owners if you’re spending time with a veterinarian). Experienced health care professionals know that patients and families are important teachers. A long—and hopefully leisurely—conversation about the above matters with the person whom you are shadowing can add to the experience. Most professions appreciate the opportunity to reflect and teach.

The broad question is: “*What did I learn?*” I suggest that, among other activities during this experience, you consider these questions:

- What did I learn from this transaction with the patient about:
 - The patient’s illness
 - What’s going on in the patient’s life that may have importance in dealing with the illness
 - The doctor-patient relationship
 - The importance of spending enough time
 - The importance of engaged listening without interruption
 - How the doctor 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 doctor?

I suggest that you **keep a journal** of your experiences and reflections. Journaling is not only a way to record facts and feelings, but also is an important step in becoming a reflective doctor, a valuable quality. I suggest also that you show these guidelines to the person(s) whom you are shadowing, so that you can have shared goals.

AAMC’s Guidelines for Clinical Shadowing Experiences for Pre-Med Students

<https://www.aamc.org/download/356316/data/shadowingguidelines2013.pdf>

Step by Step Guide to Get the Most Out of Your Shadowing Experience

STEP 1: Research and contact different health professionals in your field you want to shadow.

- Find potential opportunities to shadow by:
 - Contacting your own healthcare provider, or friends or family who work in healthcare
 - Contacting Alumni or guest speakers from Bradley University or a professional school you are interested in
 - Finding large and small hospitals, private practices, community health centers, free clinics and hospice centers
 - Contact organizations
- Send an email, call directly or send a written letter
- Keep in mind that private or small practices, such as those involved in dental, physical or occupational therapy, or veterinary will probably be easiest to make and maintain contact due to their size. Hospitals and larger institutions may be busier, bureaucratic, and require multiple follow up contacts. Don't give up!
- Confirm dates, times, length of shadowing if possible, and any other details before your first day arrival (check-in procedures, documentation needed, dress code etc.)

STEP 2: It's your first day shadowing! WHOOW! What to expect and what to do.

- Expect
 - To be standing around and watching everything the healthcare professional does.
 - The health professional may ask the patient if they are okay with you observing and a patient may say no. Do not take it personally.
- Do
 - Dress business casual, unless directed otherwise.
 - Ignore any awkwardness or feeling out of place while a procedure or consultation is happening. Everyone who has shadowed has been through it!
 - Greet everyone and smile. Address everyone formally unless told otherwise.
 - BRING SOMETHING SMALL TO TAKE NOTES ON! This is a learning experience. Pay attention to:
 - People to observe:
 - The health professional, other employees, patients and their families
 - Work environment factors to observe:
 - Workload and pace, teamwork, communication styles, attitude and work values
 - Work style factors to observe:
 - Skills required, procedures/interventions being performed, type and length of patient interaction, equipment used, and variety of tasks performed
 - Ask questions! Don't interrupt a procedure. Remember you're a guest. But ask at an appropriate time.
 - Some good sample questions to ask are at the end of this handout

STEP 3: Day one is done. Figure out what you know and don't know about people who work in this profession.

- Do you know about their...
 - Lifestyle
 - Reasons to do a procedure a certain way
 - Work schedule
 - Office and teamwork dynamics
 - Patient interactions
 - Skills require

STEP 4: Further Shadowing. Show interest and ask questions to find out what you want to know.

- Make arrangements for future shadowing or observation experience.
- Network! Ask if they have colleagues in other settings or specialties with whom you might also shadow.

STEP 5: Reflect. The key to determining if this is the best career path for you!

- What did you like and dislike about the professional and job you were shadowing?
- Based on your experiences, what are your next step(s) to determining the best career path for you?
- _____

Sample Questions to Ask during Job Shadowing or Observations:

- How did you become interested in (field)?
- How did you get started in your field?
- What career path did you take to reach your current position? Is this a "typical" path, or has it changed?
- Could you describe your work day? Tell me what you like about your job/field? Tell me what you dislike?
- What kind of skills do you use as part of your day-to-day job? What skills would you suggest a current student work on while at Bradley?
- What college courses have helped you out the most during your career? Why? What courses would you suggest to someone interested in your field? What do you think is the best educational preparation for a career in _____?
- Which part of your job is most challenging?
- What personal attributes do you think are essential to success in your field?
- From your point of view, what qualities do you look for in _____?
- What experiences have you had that you think have been invaluable to your learning to be a good _____?
- What else do you think I need to know in order to make an intelligent decision about _____ as my career?
- If you could do it all over again, would you choose the same path for yourself? Why? What would you change?
- What suggestions would you give to a student in regards to their resume?
- Are there other (job titles, career paths) that I should be looking at that are comparable to _____?
- Can you suggest anyone else whom it would be helpful to talk to? May I use your name when contacting him or her?
- What do you like best and least about your job?
- How do you to balance your family/personal life with this career?
- How has the industry changed since you began working in it?
- What is your advice on applying to, and choosing, a health professions school?
- What are some trends you see in this profession?
- How do you continue to grow your education or skills?

Adapted from Smith Career Center's recommended questions for Informational Interviews:
<http://www.bradley.edu/offices/student/scc/alumni/searchprocess/infointerviewing/>