12 Tips on How to Make the Most of Your Health Professions Shadowing Experience

1. It's Observation Only – Remember that shadowing is an observational experience only and it does not count as service or volunteer experience. However, you can learn a lot by observing the daily activities of someone in your intended profession. Take note of how the person works as part of a team, how long they do/don't spend with patients, how they communicate with others and additional skills that seem essential to being an excellent health care professional.

2. Time to Explore – This is an opportunity for you to explore generally what a career in health care is like, not for you to determine what you want to specialize in. Therefore, it is wise to observe a variety of professions, specialties and settings before determining which role might be the best fit for you.

3. Know Your Limits – Do not touch or handle patients at all, even if asked to. This is a major liability issue and protects you, the patient and the health care team. Be prepared to witness some serious things though. You will typically be on your feet and under bright lights so always stay hydrated and eat before you arrive. If you start to feel dizzy alert someone and immediately get low to the floor. If you feel uncomfortable in any way let the person you are shadowing know so they can offer assistance.

4. Be Accommodating With Your Schedule – You are likely a very busy student and the optimal times for shadowing a health care professional may not fit neatly into your open time blocks. However, you should be prepared to make time for this activity if it is truly a priority for you.

5. Be Respectful – Always be mindful of patient confidentiality and treat patients with respect but also be nice to everyone you encounter; the other health care professionals, other student learners and administrative staff too.

6. Research Their Field & Position – Before you arrive the first day go online to learn more about the person and his/her field, specialty, training, career path, responsibilities, etc.

7. Dress Professionally – You want to make a positive impression so wear clothes that are professional, clean and pressed. You must wear closed-toed shoes in most patient settings- no flip flops or sandals. Absolutely do not wear jeans, sweatpants, tank tops, short skirts, open-toed shoes, etc. You will be asked to leave if you aren’t dressed appropriately.

8. Act Professionally – Be courteous at all times. Don’t interrupt professionals when they are speaking with patients or others. Show up when you say you are going to. If you are truly sick and cannot make it call their office in advance to let them know you need to reschedule. You want them to take you seriously... especially if you are considering asking for a letter of recommendation or evaluation at the end of your experience.

9. Ask Questions – You are there to learn so ask questions! But don’t overburden your mentor, especially when they are with patients. You might want to keep an index card to write questions down you will be able to ask later at a more opportune time.

10. Study – This should be a fun educational experience for you so take a little time to study relevant terms, cases, diseases or things you observed in preparation for your next visit.

11. Thank Them – This is an uncompensated activity that extremely busy professionals offer you so send them a simple note of thanks once you have completed your experience. As an added bonus, you might offer to take them out for coffee towards the end of your time together so you can ask any additional questions you may have about their career path, specialty decision, rewards and challenges, future of their field, etc.

12. Shadow Some More – Ask your mentor for recommendations on who to contact next for another shadowing experience. You can also shadow over fall, winter or summer breaks while you are at home, visiting family/friends or studying/traveling abroad. Use the step-by-step guide on our website to see how you can contact additional professionals on your own.