

SHADOWING IN THE HEALTH PROFESSIONS

Shadowing a physician, dentist, etc. is an important and expected part of your pre-professional planning. Shadowing will help you explore your fit for the good, bad and ugly sides of a medical career. It will also prepare you to speak credibly about your career plans when applying to professional schools.

Finding a professional to shadow

This can be one of the toughest parts of your pre-professional journey. It's all about building your network. Ask everyone you know if they know a professional working in your intended career. Ask your own healthcare provider if s/he can recommend someone you can call to shadow. When you do ask someone if you can shadow, don't take it personally if you are turned down, everyone is busy. Instead ask if there are two colleagues s/he can recommend you contact.

While volunteering doesn't always lead to actually 'shadowing' a professional, it may open the door to set up a shadowing opportunity. Some hospitals have structured volunteer programs that will assign you professionals to shadow.

Finding a practice setting

You should aim to shadow in a variety of practice settings, but always include a general or primary care practice setting. Look for variety in the patient demographics, too, e.g. pediatrics, geriatrics, rural, urban, etc. Shadowing in a teaching hospital is usually a good place to start, since the hospital is structured to accommodate students. You can expand your shadowing network from there by asking for referrals to new shadowing opportunities.

Being prepared for your first shadowing experience

You should have professional attire: dress slacks, a conservative collared shirt and tie or sweater and comfortable (closed toe) shoes. Arrive at least 10 minutes before the starting time. Ask the professional if you can build in some time at the end of your shadowing experience where you can ask some follow-up questions. This way you can remain silent during patient encounters and discreetly make note of questions while observing, then review the questions with the host professional at the end.

Record your experience. When you apply to professional school, you will need to know the name, title, address and contact information for the professionals you observe. You'll also need to report the amount of time that you shadowed. It is also helpful to journal your reflections on some of the following, since it can provide good material for your Personal Statement:

- What did you like? Dislike?
- What are the pros and cons of this particular practice/setting?
- Reflect on the procedures, tools, problem solving that you observed.
- How much administrative work did you observe?
- What was the nature of the health problems you observed: chronic? Acute? Lack of follow-through by the patient?
- What was the pace of the practice like? Did you like it?
- Were there unsolved problems/issues? How did you feel about them?
- Can you picture yourself doing this work? What would you do differently? The same?

ALWAYS follow-up with a thank you.

And if you had a significant experience or developed a relationship with the hosting professional, keep them updated on the progress you are making in achieving your career goals.

SHADOWING FAQ

How long should I shadow?

You should aim for more than 40 hours with at least three different professionals, optimally in three different settings.

What if I shadow in a location outside the U.S.?

This experience will count as shadowing, but it does not replace the need to shadow in the U.S. and it can be listed separately on your application. It would be interesting to make a compare/contrast statement relating the international experience to your U.S. shadowing.

What if I talked to a health professional, but didn't actually observe him/her on the job?

Informational interviewing is not the same as shadowing (direct observation) and while it is an important part of career exploration, it does not give you the same opportunities for career reflection that direct observation does.

What is HIPPA?

HIPPA is a federal law with a privacy rule that might limit your shadowing experiences. Respect the privacy of the patient. Do not speak to a patient. If you see someone you recognize at the host site, be professional and tell the host professional that you know the patient and feel it would be best to not observe this particular visit/treatment. Never discuss patient details in the presence of anyone but your shadowing host.

Does it matter if the professional is in training (e.g. a resident) or already board licensed?

What's important is your ability to reflect on what you observed. If you observe a technician or assistant, or a student in their clinical rotations, you will likely learn new things, but it is not the same as observing what the professional (D.M.D, D.D.S, D.O., M.D., Pharm.D., D.V. M, etc.) does with the patient. If you want to observe a specialist, you can shadow a resident or fellow.

What if I work in healthcare, do I still need to shadow?

You are lucky to have this experience, but your work does not replace shadowing unless the essence of your job is to shadow a professional (e.g., surgical assistant or medical scribe). Even if your job is to shadow a professional, you can learn more and strengthen your professional perspective by seeking observation of a different patient base or different climate, setting (e.g., retail v. hospital pharmacy or private v. clinic group practice). Depth and breadth in shadowing experiences should be your goal.