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Atlantis

POCKET GUIDE TO SHADOWING



This guide was written to help you make the most out of your shadowing opportunities. The thoughts and suggestions put forth are written by current medical students with hours of clinical experience. Reference this guide to get the most out of your Atlantis program.

It is common (but dangerous) to lose sight of the main point of shadowing -- namely, the depth of the experience -- and to focus instead on accumulating hours just to impress medical schools. The "quality over quantity" cliché is relevant to many parts of your medical school application, especially here.

Ultimately, what matters far more than the number of hours listed on your application is how you can speak about your shadowing experiences in essays and interviews. In this sense, shadowing will help you get into medical school because it is something you intrinsically have an interest for, not something you feel the need to "get out of the way" or "check off of a list."

If you can keep this idea in mind, you will avoid time-wasting, menial shadowing experiences, and instead search for ones that are well worth your time. To start, you may be wondering how to determine if a shadowing experience is "meaningful."

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE PRIMARY BENEFITS OF SHADOWING A PHYSICIAN?

1. Shadowing helps you develop a better sense of what a medical career looks like. Can you stand the sight of blood? Could you handle the pressure of making life-altering decisions for others?
2. Shadowing allows you to determine if you are willing to make the large investment of time and finances necessary when entering medical school.
3. Shadowing provides insight and experience that you can talk about in your application and interviews.

Your clinical experiences will come up often in the medical school application process (e.g., in your personal statement, secondary essays, and interviews) because medical schools are looking for applicants who are not only committed to medicine, but also well-informed in their decision.

It is easy for people to say they "want to be a doctor when they grow up," as they envision wearing that pristine white coat, but it is a much more realistic, believable statement if you can recall specific examples from clinical environments that support that desire. Thus, shadowing experience is a strong, necessary piece of evidence that medical schools need so they can be convinced you understand what you are committing to.

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE ON CLINICAL SHADOWING?

The fact that you have been accepted as an Atlantis student means you already have a leg up on other applicants in terms of shadowing experiences. It is important that you maximize this opportunity.

One good start is by taking regular notes, both clinically and otherwise. These anecdotes can help you not only craft your personal statement, but also crush medical school interviews (see below for more on maximizing your Atlantis shadowing experience).

If, in addition to your Atlantis experience, you feel you could gain from further exposure to a particular field, try all means possible (email professors, etc.) to find more shadowing opportunities. In fact, many medical schools will require that you have at least some shadowing experience in the US.

One strategy that works well for many pre-meds is asking a science professor who also sees patients as an MD. Try to see if you can follow him/her around the hospital/clinic where s/he works for an afternoon. Check out the post on the Atlantis blog for more detailed help on securing a shadowing opportunity.

HOW CAN I MAXIMIZE MY ATLANTIS SHADOWING EXPERIENCE (AND OTHER CLINICAL OPPORTUNITIES)?

1. Pursue active learning (and ditch passive absorption). Two pre-med students can be exposed to the exact same shadowing or clinical experience (e.g., shadowing the same physician, seeing the same patients, seeing the same procedures, all for the same number of hours), but end up with radically different takeaways.
 - a. Be sure to actively look. Observe, and ask about the things going on around you. Always maintain a professional demeanor and be constantly aware of the environment you are in (office, hallway, operating room, etc.). If you spend your entire day standing in the corner or scrolling through social media, it will show when you reflect on your shadowing experience later!
 - b. Write down names of unfamiliar medical terminology, procedures, or techniques you did not get a chance to ask your mentor about. Look these up later.
 - c. If the situation and timing are appropriate, try to ask your mentor questions on the spot. This will show your mentor how actively engaged you are, and will help you gain insight into cultural differences between the different healthcare systems or procedures.

2. Make bullet points of memorable cases/ patients. Write down a succinct summary of any particularly interesting/ touching case that you encountered in the hospital. Perhaps you were impressed with a physician's ability to calm an upset/ angry patient. Maybe you were touched by the way a nurse interacted with a patient's mother at his/her bedside. Keeping a running log of memorable phrases and details may help provide ideas for your medical school personal statement, secondary essays, and interviews.

3. Culturally and clinically, the Atlantis experience will be quite different from what you have grown accustomed to in the US-- and that is great! Hopefully your Atlantis program will allow you to gain and assimilate a more comprehensive perspective on how medicine is practiced around the world. As you spend time in the hospital, compare and contrast:

a. Patient-physician relationships

- What was the most meaningful interaction your shadowing physician had with a patient?
- How much time was given to each patient?
- How connected and invested does the physician seem with each patient's story?

b. Hospital resources/practices

- Does your shadowing physician need to gain permission from a department head before s/he makes a treatment option? What about in the case of an expensive surgery?
- Does a particular procedure or machine stand out from your shadowing experiences?

c. Healthcare models

- How was your shadowing physician educated throughout high school, medical school, residency, fellowship, etc.?
- How many patients does the physician see each day?
- Is insurance private (perhaps through employment) or public through the government?
- Are there copays?
- What else differs from the US system?

Final thoughts

It is your duty to pique the physician's interest (without seeming overbearing) and to create an open environment in which you can maximize your learning. Only in rare circumstances are doctors unwilling to help -- they would not have allowed you into their workplace if this were the case! Make sure to show gratitude to the doctors and hospital staff who have sacrificed time seeing patients just to contribute to your early medical education. You have been granted a rare opportunity, so be sure to show your appreciation to your physicians. Best of luck as you continue to walk the path towards becoming a doctor.

- Alice Li, Stanford Med 2020