

GET THE MOST OUT OF YOUR *Healthcare Experience*



It is important to shadow health professionals to clarify your fit with professions, as well as to prepare for applying to programs. Doing this process earlier in your educational career can potentially save you time, money, and stress.

Professional schools want to see that you have worked with real patients in clinical settings. Healthcare experience can come in a variety of forms, including: **shadowing**, **volunteering**, and **paid employment**. As paid experiences can be limited, this document will mostly focus on shadowing and volunteering.

When you shadow or volunteer, you are able to test ideas about a profession, as well as to see how the profession matches with your values, desires, and abilities. Whether or not you like or dislike the profession, this can refine your goals and increase your knowledge of the field.

Shadowing and volunteering will allow you to speak credibly about what you know on your applications and in interviews. If you have a good experience and develop a relationship with a physician and/or a volunteer coordinator, this can also lead to a reference when you apply. If you do not have any healthcare experience, it can be a sign to admissions committees that you are either not motivated, prepared, or both. Sometimes, this lack of experience can prevent you from getting into programs even though you are an otherwise qualified applicant.

HOW DO YOU FIND HEALTHCARE EXPERIENCE?



Shadowing

1. First, try to use **your current contacts**. For example, call your own doctor's office or ask your friend's parents in healthcare fields if they know anyone that you could possibly shadow.
2. Options for shadowing physicians in Corvallis are limited. It might be best to start in your hometown or apply for the **preceptorship** at OSU (see requirements and deadlines here: <http://www.science.oregonstate.edu/node/129>). Pre-PA, PT, and OT students should look at options in PHHS at: <http://health.oregonstate.edu/students/current/undergraduate/internships>. Pre-Dental students can contact dentists and Pre-Optometry students can contact optometrists directly for opportunities.
3. Outside of Corvallis, it may work to email professionals you find online at healthcare organizations websites. *Don't group email multiple people at once.* **Be professional** when composing emails with a proper greeting, body, and signature. (See more about professionalism on the next page).

When you contact someone, include:

- A professional resume <http://career.oregonstate.edu/students/career-trail/gain-tools-skills/resume>
- A paragraph on why you are interested in working with that particular person.

Make sure you include the fact that you are a pre-health professions student attending OSU. Give them a week or two to reply before you follow up by email or phone. **Do Not harass them after only a day or two.**

Volunteering

1. One easy way to start looking is going to our Internship and Volunteering Lists: <http://www.science.oregonstate.edu/volunteer-opportunities-pre-health-students>. Review the requirements and expected time commitments carefully.
2. Some students have been successful starting as a volunteer & getting to know a professional which can lead to shadowing.
3. Join a **pre-professional club** (i.e., the Pre-Med or Pre-Dentistry clubs) and get connected to learn about opportunities.
4. Check your **email** every day, especially those from your department and other appropriate listserves. <http://www.science.oregonstate.edu/node/125>

HOW MUCH HEALTHCARE EXPERIENCE DO YOU NEED?

Each health professional or healthcare organization will have different requirements for hours allowed/required. The information below is geared towards medical school, but most of the ideas work for all health areas. Check with specific schools or programs for requirements.

Medical schools generally do not require a set amount of hours of healthcare experience, but they do want you to have enough to meaningfully reflect (in your application & interview) on these experiences.

You can usually be flexible about how you set up your hours depending on what is the best time for the physician and the clinic/hospital or other health-related facility.

A couple of scenarios might be:

1. **A longitudinal experience** – some people spend a few hours every week for several weeks or months (or years for volunteering). This type of experience can help you communicate later your interests easily because you've spent enough time with one organization or physician to see all sides of their schedule, not just the "cool" parts.
2. **A short-term intensive experience** – some people spend time shadowing one physician for an entire week in one stretch, Mon - Fri, 8 a.m. - 5 p.m. This will give you a glimpse of day-to-day life. Likewise, some people volunteer for certain major events, like a blood drive. This can also give you a taste of what it's like to organize and run an event.

It might be a good idea to do a combination of both strategies with different healthcare professionals/facilities and opportunities in different specialties over your undergrad years. A great time to be active is during summer or school breaks. Weekend rounds can be easier to observe since more people will not be working and not be as rushed.

Make sure you see more mundane tasks of healthcare professionals. Professional schools want to know you are familiar with the potential downsides of healthcare. This lowers the possibility that you will become disillusioned or drop out of professional school.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

WHAT SHOULD YOU PAY ATTENTION TO WHILE SHADOWING?

Shadowing is the act of observing a professional in their daily interactions, and it can be done in almost any profession. Shadowing a physician, dentist, or other healthcare professional means that you observe how they:

- Interact and communicate with patients
- Make informed decisions
- Work with the "healthcare team"
- Organize the day
- Allow time for the unexpected
- Stay current in the profession
- Address uncertainty
- Integrate personal & professional life
- And much more...

In addition, not only will you learn from the professional but also from the patients and the patients' families (or their owners if you are spending time with a veterinarian).

Debrief your experience with the person whom you are shadowing. Most professionals appreciate the opportunity to reflect and teach. Ask about health questions but also about what you observed. Remember, to wait to ask your questions until it's appropriate (see under the *Professionalism* section).

It can be useful to shadow *multiple* specialties or professions. Some professional schools see this as a sign that you are making a well informed decision to pursue a career in healthcare.

NOTE: You should try various experiences to gain a breadth of understanding, but it's good to find at least one that you stick with to show commitment and depth of experience.

while you're observing/volunteering ...and after your experience

- ✓ What did you learn from your interaction 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 healthcare provider-patient interactions and relationship?
 - The importance of spending enough time with a patient?
 - The importance of engaged listening without interruption?
 - How the healthcare professionals reason and make decisions?
 - What did the patient teach you?
- ✓ Can I see myself doing what this professional does on a daily basis?
- ✓ What are some highlights and frustrations about this career?
- ✓ Do I like the pace of this profession?
- ✓ What did I learn about what it's really like to be a healthcare provider (physician, physician's assistant, veterinarian, nurse, dentist, etc.)?
 - What are the ins and outs of the profession? What goes on behind the scenes?
- ✓ Follow up. It's a great idea to send a thank you letter to the professional you shadowed. If things went well they may ask you back.
- ✓ If it seems appropriate, at the end of your experience, ask if they would be willing to write a letter of recommendation in support of your application to professional school. You can also keep in touch with that professional or your supervisor to contact them later about writing a letter closer to when you apply.

PROFESSIONALISM

It is crucial that you act like a professional while you are shadowing a healthcare provider or volunteering or working in a healthcare facility. This may seem obvious, but below are some important key things to keep in mind:

- Respect patient privacy – Some patients will not want you in the room with them. (*Most clinics and businesses require that you sign a privacy waiver saying information will not be shared.
See information on HIPAA regulations here: <http://www.hhs.gov/ocr/privacy/index.html>
- Make sure you arrive on time to each shift/appointment.
- Be courteous to everyone you meet.
- Know your limits – You are not a medical professional so don't expect to participate in hands-on care.

- Try not to get in the way; stand back and observe. Some people may involve you a little, but don't expect too much.
- Wear comfortable, closed-toed shoes – you most likely will be on your feet for a while and will be exposed to equipment, bodily fluids, and sharp objects.
- Questions are usually welcomed – they can show your interest and focus. It is usually best to wait until after the patient visit or rounds to ask questions.

The focus of clinic visits is the patient, not the student. Complex decisions are often times being made and you don't want to disrupt important conversations.

- For more tips on professionalism, go to: <http://career.oregonstate.edu/files/professionalism.pdf>



WHAT DID YOU LEARN? KEEP A JOURNAL

Keep a journal of your experiences and reflections. Journaling is not only a way to record facts and feelings, but also an important step in becoming a reflective healthcare provider, a valuable quality.

The journal will also be a helpful resource as you complete your applications to professional school. You should keep track of dates and hours spent shadowing/volunteering. Remember, though, to not include any identifying information.

