

Guidelines For Getting The Most Out of the “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 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 health care professional “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 health care professional-patient relationship
 - The importance of spending enough time
 - The importance of engaged listening without interruption
 - How the health care professional 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 health care professional?

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. The journal will also be a helpful resource as you complete your applications to professional school. I suggest also that you show these guidelines to the person(s) whom you are shadowing, so that you can have shared goals.