

A guide to surviving nights

Introduction

Since the introduction of the European Working Time Directive (EWTD) very few foundation year 1 trainees are expected to work night shifts. In the pre-EWTD era nights were induction by fire, a large amount of responsibility bestowed upon trainees just out of medical school with very little supervision provided. Although this meant trainees had little or no rest periods and minimal dedicated training during a shift, it did provide an excellent environment for self-directed on the job learning. Currently junior doctors are usually first exposed to night shifts from foundation year 2 onwards and are able to benefit from their extra year of work experience. Whether you're about to start a set of nights as a surgical or medical junior or those dreaded accident and emergency nights, the following advice is offered.

Preparing for a set of night shifts

Rest during the day of the first night shift. Make sure you eat well before the start of the shift and are wearing comfortable clothes and shoes. Bring food and drink with you, there is nothing more depressing than eating the parched leftovers from the hospital canteen while everyone else is tucked up in bed.

Make sure you carry a notebook, pens and an acute medicine or surgery text such as the *Oxford Handbook of Clinical Medicine*. Swot up on ALS (Advanced Life Support) and/or ATLS (Advanced Trauma Life Support), as you are likely to be the first doctor to arrive at a crash call.

Find out who the registrar and consultant on call are and introduce yourself if they are present during handover. Make a list of useful numbers to keep on you such as ward extensions and important bleep numbers, i.e. your seniors, the radiographer on call and the laboratory technicians on call.

Know your way around the hospital. Get to know where the haematology and chemistry laboratories are and their hours

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of work. If there are no on-site laboratories or radiographer discover what the protocols are for sending off emergency blood samples or calling in a radiographer overnight. Find out where the toilets, doctors mess and vending machines are in advance and always carry spare change.

Handover

The art of handover is an essential medical skill (Heetun and Chalmers, 2008). Good handover prevents errors and ensures continuity of care, increasingly important now there is a greater reliance on shift work. Be on time, pay attention during the hand-over and take notes. Use the patient list to clearly mark the jobs that need to be done so you can prioritize them afterwards.

The night shift itself

After handover has finished order the jobs in list of importance or urgency and complete them systematically. Clearly document in the notes any problems encountered with patients during the night and how you dealt with them. Keep seniors informed of any problems you are unsure of how to manage or any problems which you can manage but your seniors should be made aware of. They may be grumpy, especially if they have been woken up by your call, but will be grateful for being told about the sick patient earlier rather than later when the situation may be harder to reverse.

Take regular breaks including a longer meal break in the middle of the shift. Exhaustion leads to mistakes. Very few situations prevent you having a 10-minute rest and cup of tea.

Never procrastinate. Night shifts are highly unpredictable so aim to complete jobs as soon as they arise. During busy shifts I always remember a quote from a

famous South African trauma surgeon (although I have had to exchange the expletives) 'if you need to eat, eat and if you need to defecate, defecate'.

On nearing the end of the shift, complete a succinct handover list for the day team. Bring your toothbrush, you will feel more refreshed for the morning ward round, especially if it is an acute medical round lasting until mid morning.

At handover, be prepared to discuss all admissions and problems that arose during the night. Try to inform individual teams of any problems that occurred with their patients during the night if they are not present at the handover.

After the shift has finished make sure you are able to return home safely especially if driving, frighteningly many doctors have stories about falling asleep at the wheel. It is difficult to plan meals during night shifts but make sure you have at least one good meal and a decent amount of sleep before the next night shift begins.

Conclusions

Night shifts can be daunting and exhausting. However, they are an essential part of medical training and an invaluable learning experience. Night shifts enhance one's communication, teamworking and organizational skills, all important facets to medical practice. They are also a wonderful opportunity to perform procedures or assist in operations where normally a junior would not have the chance. Prepare well and nights become enjoyable and provide an endless source of humorous dinner stories. **BJHM**

Conflict of interest: none.

Heetun M, Chalmers R (2008) Tips on giving a good handover. *Br J Hosp Med* 69(5): M78-M79

KEY POINTS

- Always carry a pad of paper and a list of important numbers.
- Regular breaks and meals are very important.
- Let seniors know immediately of any problems.