

# Reflecting on the importance of work experience for the next generation of doctors

A stroke consultant and pre-medical student discuss the benefits of work experience and their respective engagement in placement programmes.

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## Introduction

**Consultant:** Work experience can form an important element of an individual's portfolio. It is highly valued by students, healthcare institutions and medical schools. Despite this, there is a mismatch between supply and demand, with many students struggling to gain access to programmes offering experience. Dubrey and Karagiannis (2018) stated that some students reported contacting as many as 50 doctors, often with no response. They argued that recognition of clinicians' involvement in work experience (in an unspecified manner) by the Royal College of Physicians would encourage consultants to participate in these programmes. This article encourages healthcare institutions and workers to focus on providing more of this for students.

## A student discusses his work experience

**Student:** Since I started secondary school, I have been particularly interested in science, but it was not until I was 16 years old that medicine seemed like a viable career option. For the next 2 years, I tried to gain some first-hand insight in a healthcare setting to see if medicine would be right for me.

My first experience involved helping the administration team at a GP surgery in London. Being able to book appointments and organise patient information made me appreciate the importance of administration in medicine and the need for confidentiality associated with it.

I was also fortunate to volunteer at a residential care home for 6 months. As the activity organiser, it was my role to engage residents with various activities, such as painting or doing jigsaw puzzles. This experience was invaluable, as it showed me that I thrive in a healthcare-related environment and that I can help those residents.

## How can we accommodate work experience for pre-medical students?

**Consultant:** London North West University Healthcare has supported students with work experience for many years. Its programme has won the Fair Train Gold quality standard award and has helped consultants to concentrate on delivering the work experience by handling the administrative work for them in the trust.

I have enjoyed participating in this programme for the last few years. Last year, the programme was delivered virtually because of the COVID-19 pandemic. I have always felt that clinicians can learn something from delivering this guidance and teaching to the students. For me, the key points to delivering good quality work experience are:

- I involve my team so that students get to shadow and learn from different members of the team
- Activities like ward rounds, clinics, theatre sessions, observing a radiological procedure and multidisciplinary team meetings are incorporated in the placement, to ensure a wide spectrum of exposure to the field
- I encourage students to ask questions and to try to record what they observe in a diary, so that they can reflect on their new experiences.

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## A student reflects on his hospital placement at Northwick Park Hospital

**Student:** When I entered the acute stroke ward for the first time, seeing the patients affected me strongly. Despite being aware of the impact that a stroke can have on an individual, seeing the effects on someone in front of you was very different. Every patient was facing their own challenges: some were unable to speak or move voluntarily, whereas some were beginning to show signs of improvement, weeks, maybe even months after their stroke. Experiencing this opened me up to two critical aspects of medicine. Not only does a doctor need to be able to empathise with the patients they are treating, but they also need to have coping mechanisms to deal with the emotional toll of medicine.

Observing a teaching session for F1 doctors led by the consultant showed me other responsibilities that a doctor may have, aside from clinical practice. Personally, seeing that medicine was also teaching and research-oriented showed me the breadth of options for a medical career. Looking back, this was a fundamental reason for me deciding on this profession.

On the penultimate day of my work experience, I went to the emergency department to see newly admitted stroke patients. An elderly man arrived who was unable to speak as a result of his stroke and for whom we had minimal patient history. Watching how the consultant approached this situation with limited knowledge about the patient showed me the importance of problem solving in medicine.

When we returned to the stroke ward, the consultant had to break some bad news to a patient. He had recently been diagnosed with lung cancer from a chest computed tomography scan and the consultant said it was highly unlikely the patient would survive. I felt particularly nervous about seeing him. With every other patient on the hospital placement, there always seemed to be some hope for recovery despite the severity of their condition, but then I had to witness a patient being told his condition would likely deteriorate in the coming weeks. This highlighted to me a harsh reality about medicine – not everyone can be saved. In light of this, I also learned that even when a patient was dying, something could always be done to make a positive difference to the quality of their life, such as the provision of palliative care.

## Conclusions

**Consultant:** Ultimately, work experience not only provides students with a better insight into a career in medicine but also plays a significant role in the application process, as students can draw on specific examples from their placements to demonstrate what they have learned. To address the lack of opportunities for experience, it is important that healthcare providers support staff in delivering work experience, alongside their other responsibilities in the hospital. Having taken part in such programmes, I would strongly encourage other consultants to engage in delivering work experience. Not only is it a rewarding experience for clinicians, but we are also guiding students to affirm their place in medicine and setting up the next generation of doctors.

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## Reference

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