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Alternatives to traditional medical work experience for aspiring medical students

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Aspiring medical students have always been encouraged to gain work experience to obtain a realistic understanding of what healthcare is really like, particularly the physical and emotional demands it makes.¹ Work experience is also a way to develop characteristics, such as empathy and effective communication, that are indispensable to being a doctor (as set out in the NHS Constitution and explained in the Medical Schools Council guidance).² These attributes can potentially be attained through non-clinical work experience too and should ideally be reflected on and showcased at interview.

Work experience placements in healthcare settings are notoriously oversubscribed every year, and aspiring medics without family or social connections face increased barriers to accessing these placements. Furthermore, 2021 and 2022 applicants have had a particularly difficult time getting placements in hospitals because of the covid-19 pandemic.³ Alternatives to clinical work experience are therefore more important than ever, and it is vital that students understand how to engage with and reflect on non-clinical work experience. There are also many free virtual work experience opportunities available, allowing aspiring medics to learn more about medicine, the healthcare environment, and the structure of the NHS to overcome the barriers in attaining clinical work experience.

Non-clinical work experience

Demonstrating an understanding of the core values expected in a doctor (such as teamwork, communication, and empathy) can be valuable in a medical school application. This can be helped by reflecting on your own life experiences, such as:

- *Jobs in the service industry*—Many students have jobs in retail or hospitality during their school years. You could reflect on the communication skills that develop from extensive interaction with a wide variety of people in an often highly pressured environment, much like medicine.
- *Volunteering in a care environment* such as care homes for the elderly, hospices, nurseries, and special schools. This can help develop attributes such as empathy and respect.
- *Providing care for an ill or elderly family member*—Experience of a caring role develops values such as conscientiousness and empathy.
- *Leadership roles such as being a team captain*—These enable you to take responsibility for your own actions, work well in a team, and deal effectively with problems.

Books for wider reading on medicine

These books showcase the realities of life as a doctor and provide insight into key issues within the medical world, allowing one to develop an understanding of medicine and stay up to date on current hot topics in the medical world.

- *Dear Life* (by Rachel Clarke) emphasises the importance of patient centred care and empathy, even in a patient's final days of life when medicine can no longer help.
- *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (by Rebecca Skloot) shows a budding medic or researcher the importance of ethical scientific research because of the real human consequences it can have.
- *The Health Gap* (by Michael Marmot) highlights the social injustices that affect the health of many, which can help aspiring medics realise that free healthcare in the NHS addresses only one of many societal issues.

This is not to say that only medical books are useful. Any book that enables you to reflect on the workings of society and has helped you understand your own personal motivations and connection to others is valuable.

Online medical work experience

Medical schools require applicants to understand what medicine, as a degree and career, involves. Online work experience provides you with a flexible and accessible opportunity to learn more about medicine from the comfort of your own room, showcasing areas of medicine, hospitals, treatments, and surgeries which students would not have access to in person. Though these opportunities are extremely convenient and informative, they lack the face to face interactions of in-person work experience. Online medical work experience should therefore preferably be done in conjunction with some form of in-person experience.

These opportunities can be found by googling key terms such as “free online medical work experience” or looking on medicine blogs on Instagram, and talks can be found on the Facebook pages of university medical societies.

Live virtual work experience

Medic Mentor has partnered with the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, University Hospitals Birmingham, to provide a full day programme running monthly, live on YouTube. Sessions involve several doctors acting out different scenarios in a clinical environment, with each scene followed by a thorough explanation of the medicine and communication techniques

demonstrated. This is extremely helpful for students to get a full understanding of the scenario and realise the importance of teamwork and communication among the medical team. The programme also uses Sli.do to allow participants to interact with the team and obtain prompt, informative answers. Students can apply for the programme via Medic Mentor's website (<https://medicmentor.co.uk/university-hospitals-birmingham-trust-virtual-work-experience/>).

Online work experience courses

These online courses are self directed and can be done in your own time. They provide a wealth of information about the healthcare environment and the NHS.

- Brighton and Sussex Medical School has created a virtual work experience course (<https://bsmsoutreach.thinkific.com/courses/VWE>). The course comprises six modules: the NHS and general practice, elderly medicine, mental health, surgery and inpatient medicine, emergency medicine, and palliative medicine and communication skills. Each module provides an insight to the staff and procedures of the department, exhibiting several patient scenarios, where aspiring medics can analyse the "patients" symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment.
- Observe GP (<https://www.rcgp.org.uk/observegp>), launched by the Royal College of General Practitioners, has videos on its platform which display a variety of patients and their conditions. The platform also allows the viewer to "meet" many members of the general practice team. Themes of the videos include management of long term conditions, self care, communication, and patient centred care.

Virtual conferences hosted by medical societies

With covid-19 restrictions, many university medical societies are now hosting their conferences online, with societies plausibly continuing this long term. Several of these conferences can be found on Facebook, simply by following the pages of the respective societies and looking at the events they'll be hosting. For instance, Imperial, UCL, Manchester, and Edinburgh (among others) have hosted many talks free of charge which are available to those outside the university. An example of this includes the Foundation Skills in Surgery conference (https://www.facebook.com/events/d41d8cd9/foundation-skills-in-surgery-2021-fss_21/218481049873104/), which was hosted by Imperial College Surgical Society in February. These conferences can give aspiring medics a glimpse into what medical school would be like, especially the real complexities of it. It's also interesting for aspiring medics to hear about the pathways for a medical student into the various fields of medicine. Attending and reflecting on conferences can show real commitment to finding out more about medical school and would make for a great talking point in an interview or personal statement. Before attending these sessions, it's important to make sure that you are eligible for them as some universities have safeguarding policies and do not allow the public to attend.

Talks from doctors in the US

International opportunities for work experience have become more common in an increasingly virtual world. For instance, Pre-health Shadowing (<https://www.prehealthshadowing.com/>) has near daily sessions with doctors in an array of different fields of medicine where doctors share information about their career, daily tasks, interesting patient cases they've encountered, and the admissions process. All the recorded talks are stored, free to access, on the Pre-health Shadowing website. Similarly, Socially Distanced

Shadowers (<https://www.sociallydistancedshadowers.com/>) have regular sessions with US doctors who share their work and experiences.

It's inspiring and enriching to attend work experience programmes from different countries and fascinating to consider different medical systems and practices. You can sign up for these talks via their respective websites and follow them on Instagram to get regular updates on upcoming sessions. However, it is important to be aware of the different time zones. In addition, @premed.opportunities on Instagram compiles regular lists of upcoming international shadowing opportunities.

Medical podcasts

Aspiring medics can also make use of medical podcasts widely available on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and SoundCloud to develop fresh perspectives to medicine and life as a doctor. Here are some examples of fascinating podcasts.

- *BMJ Sharp Scratch* (<https://www.bmj.com/sharpscratch>) explores all the things you need to know to be a good doctor that medical school doesn't teach you
- *This Podcast Will Kill You* (<https://thispodcastwillkillyou.com/>) delves into the historical origins and biological processes of many illnesses and describes their place in the world today
- *RSM Health Matters* (<https://www.rsm.ac.uk/resources/podcasts/>) contains exclusive interviews from leading figures in healthcare and focuses on a myriad of hot topics within medicine
- *The NHS Front Line* (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000h5l1/episodes/downloads>) includes recordings with frontline staff at Bradford Royal Infirmary, where listeners will be taken behind the scenes on covid-19 wards.

A different perspective

Although some of these virtual work experience programmes were born from the restrictions posed by covid-19, their creators all plan to continue delivering them for as long as feasible. In-person clinical work experience is just one way for aspiring medics to gain insight into medicine. There are now many other ways to find out more about medicine, the career, and the NHS, and to develop desirable attributes for a doctor. It's more important than ever to be proactive and independent in finding and creating opportunities for work experience. In the end, work experience is not just about going through the motions and regurgitating a list of the things you've done at an interview, but about reflecting on and learning from the experience.

Competing interests: None declared.

- 1 Medical Schools Council. Medical work experience. <https://www.medschools.ac.uk/studying-medicine/making-an-application/work-experience>.
- 2 Medical Schools Council. Guidance on relevant experience for applying to medical school. <https://www.medschools.ac.uk/media/2331/relevant-experience-for-applying-to-medical-school.pdf>.
- 3 Medical Schools Council. Guidance on gaining relevant experience during the pandemic. <https://www.medschools.ac.uk/media/2717/a-guide-for-gaining-relevant-experience-during-the-pandemic.pdf>.