Guidance on gaining relevant experience to study medicine in the time of Covid-19

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Introduction

It is a difficult time to try and gain relevant experience in healthcare. The NHS is focusing on dealing with the pandemic, outreach programs have been put on hold, and most paid employment opportunities have been stopped too.

In these circumstances, first time applicants to medicine will all be in the same situation. All medical schools are aware that the opportunities open to you have been affected and will take this into account. Consequently, medical schools will have to adapt their expectations to the situation applicants find themselves in.

What can I do about this?

Make sure to check the medical school's website for updates on work experience. Additionally, keep in mind that *clinical* work experience is not generally a requirement for applying to medical school in any year.

Why is gaining experience important?

It is important to remember why medical schools look for work experience in an application; this in turn can help you think of the numerous ways that you can demonstrate that you have acquired relevant experience. They want to see that you understand what a career in medicine involves. Work experience, and other related experiences, are only as valuable as the way you talk about them. While you will be expected to show some understanding of what it is like to be a doctor, part of this involves demonstrating that you know what it is like to work in a responsible role, particularly with the public.

What type of experience do I need?

The Medical Schools Council's guidance on work experience sets out what medical schools are looking for in terms of relevant experience to support an application to medical school. Work experience is any activity or life experience that helps you to prepare for medical school. This means any activity that allows you to demonstrate that you have:

- Had people-focused experience of providing a service, care, support or help to others, and that you understand the realities of working in a caring profession

- Developed some of the values, attitudes and behaviours essential to being a doctor such as conscientiousness, effective communication and the ability to interact with a wide variety of people. The values that medical schools are looking for are set out in the NHS Constitution and explained in MSC guidance on the Core values and attributes needed to study medicine

- A realistic understanding of medicine and in particular the physical, organisational and emotional demands of a medical career

Useful links

Guidance on relevant experience for applying to medical school

Statement on the core values and attributes needed to study medicine

MSC Work Experience Infosheet

Practical ways to gain experience

Keep a reflective diary on what is happening in the news and online

Many healthcare professionals are posting online about their experience of working during the pandemic. Listen to what they have to say and reflect on this. All healthcare professionals can be a valuable source of information and experience, not just doctors. After all, doctors work as part of large teams involving many healthcare professions, so demonstrating that you have a sense of those professions and how they work together will help you in both your personal statement and interview. Remember that some media sources are more reliable than others and that sometimes 'political spin' is put on articles to help create a headline.

Websites to explore may include:

- Newspaper pages such as the Guardian's science page and The Telegraph's health page
- The British Medical Journal's open access information
- TED Talks can provide useful background information on health topics
- Science or health related content on Twitter

Make use of online resources

There are some free online resources available that will give you a taste of what working in healthcare is all about. For example:

- Brighton and Sussex Medical School has created a free virtual work experience course which explores several different medical specialities
- The Royal College of General Practitioners has also created an interactive platform called Observe GP which highlights the many different aspects of working in primary care

Useful links

Observe GP is a free online platform providing insight into general practice.

Brighton and Sussex Medical School offers virtual work experience for prospective medical school applicants.

- The NHS Health Careers website provides insight into different careers and specialties within the health sector

Volunteer in your spare time, if you can

All forms of voluntary work can provide helpful work experience. Whilst volunteer work in the NHS might be disrupted at this time other schemes may still be in operation and worth exploring. Working with other people in a caring or service role, and in particular with people who are ill, disabled or disadvantaged is preferable, but will be difficult to arrange at this time. When undertaking any type of voluntary work, it is essential that you follow the Government's guidelines on social distancing.

Voluntary commitments to community groups (for example groups related to the work of churches, mosques and temples, or other groups such as Scouts or Guides) and online community support groups may also provide valuable experience of taking on responsibility, dealing with people and communicating effectively. It is likely that these sorts of volunteering opportunities will start to run again before healthcare related opportunities are available.

Remember: it is what you learn about yourself, about other people and about how effective care is delivered and received that counts. What you did is only a small part of the story; it is how you communicate what you learnt which matters.

Useful volunteering websites may include, but are not limited to:

- The Do IT website
- The Nextdoor website