

Your Guide to Applying to Medical School – *Part 4: Work experience and careers*

# What’s the point of work experience?

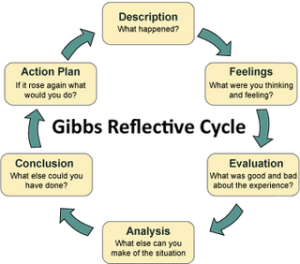
Work experience is to help you explore:

* Why **you** want to do Medicine?
* Whether **you** would be suited for a career in medicine

You need to make sure you are making an informed decision to study medicine. You don’t want to commit the rest of your life to a difficult profession if that choice is made without knowing what you’re letting yourself in for. Firstly, that means having an idea of what doctors do and secondly, it means finding out about caring for vulnerable people.

Universities want you to do work experience to help **you** – they want you to be sure that you are ready to commit yourself and want to do this. They want **you** to explore and think deeply about what a career in medicine involves and whether you would be suited to that career.  Work experience is not something which needs to be ticked off a checklist. Work experience offers a chance to reflect and learn a lot about yourself as a person, what you enjoy doing, and what you can cope with in the very real world of health care. You may even end up deciding not to do medicine as a result of the work experience or realising you are more interested in something ‘like medicine’  – paramedic, psychologist, dietician, speech therapy, radiographer etc.

It is hard to think deeply about your work experience because we are naturally inclined to think superficially and intuitively (see Daniel Kahneman’s *Thinking, Fast and Slow*). However, it is really important to properly reflect upon your experiences. To help you think about why you did work experience and what you gained from it you could use a reflection tool. One such method is the **Gibbs Reflective Cycle** – this is commonly used at medical school.



# FAQ: Where should I do work experience?

There is no “correct” answer to this and I think that this questions stems from the fact that applicants want to try to impress medical schools by doing the most amazing work experience ever. Again, this is not the point of work experience – do not treat this as a checklist exercise but as an opportunity to find out what a career in medicine involves. Your work experience placement should involve patients – doctors deal with patients every day so you need to work out if you are comfortable with them. You will not be far “wrong” in whatever work experience you chose to do as long as you spend time with patients. It goes without saying that you are not qualified and are not yet a medical student and need to respect the patients’ privacy. If they don’t want you in the room you should leave.

Suitable places to do work experience include:

* Local GP surgery
* Voluntary (or paid) work:
  + Hospice
  + Youth Club
  + Disability Centres and Schools for children with special needs
  + Nursing homes
* Hospitals
* Pharmacy

If you can try to get a mix of experiences but the key point is that it does not matter where your work experience takes place but whether you learn something from the it. Hopefully, by the end of your work experience you should have a better understanding of the role of doctors in the modern NHS (either in primary care as a GP or in secondary care as a hospital doctor)  and some of the unfortunate truths behind modern medicine (such as the fact that despite many of the advancements there is still much that we are not able to do – Atul Gawande’s *Being Mortal* is an excellent read on some of these aspects).

Remember that work experience is not just time spent in hospitals or with doctors, although that is important. Don't panic if you cannot get into a GP practice or a hospital. Any work caring for vulnerable people (adults or children) is good experience and this need not be for free if you can get a job as, for example, a care assistant. Equally, no one will look down on you if you volunteer. It is all about reflecting on these experiences and thinking about what you learnt from them.

# FAQ: How do I apply for work experience?

There are several different ways in which you can go about applying for work experience.  If you know someone who works in healthcare, you can ask them to speak to a healthcare professional and ask if they would be willing to allow you to shadow them and give you their contact details.  Approaching your GP is another option for gaining work experience. You can do this through speaking to the GP surgery receptionist or handing in a letter to your GP. If your GP does not reply or says no then you can try a neighbouring GP surgery, which is often better as you are less likely to come across people you know!

If there is an area of medicine which you are interested in it may be a good idea to try and gain some work experience here.  You should at first find out where this speciality is based (e.g. local hospital) and either look at their website which may have information on work experience or give you a contact number.  When phoning a hospital, it is useful to say the speciality you are interested in and asking for the details of a consultant’s secretary who works in that area.

Some hospitals will run a work experience programme specifically for school students. You may find information about them online. However, it is always worth calling the undergraduate education manager at any local hospitals as they may well have more information or be willing to help organise a placement for you. They will usually be happy to held or at least point you in the rigt direction.

It is important to add that often hospitals will not take on high school students for work experience due to insurance complications and you often won’t even get a reply from people you try to contact.  This means medical work experience can be difficult to arrange, so it is important to try contacting several different people and don't be disheartened by a lack of replies. Most people will be in the same situation!

# FAQ: How do I prepare for my work experience placement?

It's important to get a good night sleep and have breakfast. This is especially important if you are in theatre as you may be standing on your feet for a long period and may feel faint if you have not eaten. Read around the subject. If you are going on a cardiology learn some of the acronyms such as ECG, CABG, AF. As this will help you to follow some of the conversations.

One of the authors of this guide has written another short guide called ***Work Experience: A guide for prospective students.*** This is available here (<http://youcanbeadoctor.co.uk/work-experience-guide-for-pupils/> ) and you might be interested in reading this.