

4 things to know before you start clinical rotations

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Many medical students begin clinical rotations during the late summer and early fall. The move signifies a transition from classroom to clinic, making for a different type of learning environment.

Here's a look at some do's, don'ts, tips and tricks that will help you thrive during clinical training.

Support the support staff

As a medical student, nurses, patient care assistants and other members of the care team will provide you much guidance. Because of that, it is wise and helpful to always be on the lookout for ways you can contribute.

"Nobody is above anything and medicine is a team effort," said Mohammed Moiz Qureshi, MD, medical director of the Wilson N. Jones Regional Medical Center in Sherman, Texas. "I love my nurses to death. If you're treating your nurses well, they will definitely relay that to me. Even if I didn't interact with you all shift, if I have a nurse that comes up to me after the fact and says, 'He was absolutely phenomenal,' I'll remember. So if you lack something in medical knowledge, you can make up for it in overall helpfulness."

Kimberly Lomis, MD, the AMA's vice president of undergraduate medical education innovations, echoed those sentiments and said that working with nurses and house staff is a lesson in interprofessional education each shift.

"Students are understandably a bit intimidated at first," she said. "But because you are actively observing everyone as you try to learn, you have an opportunity to contribute to team workflows and patient safety

Asking respectful questions about why the team does its work in certain ways can help you identify how you can pitch in and sometimes leads to meaningful improvements."

See how students are making an impact in clinical arenas through health systems science.

Your rotations offer specialty insight

Clinical rotations give students the experience they need to make informed decisions about what to practice, so “choose your medical school rotations wisely ... get broad exposure to specialties, and look at them first hand,” said Chris Dangles, MD, an orthopaedic surgeon at Advocate Health Care in Bloomington, Illinois.

“I have a wife who knew she wanted to be a plastic surgeon from the time she was five years old and fortunately she was able to do that. Myself, as an orthopedic surgeon, I didn’t pick the specialty until my last year of medical school,” Dr. Dangles said, noting that he gave himself the time he needed in training to gain exposure to orthopedic surgery before choosing the specialty.

Learn the key questions to ask as you select a medical specialty.

Remember your patients

Take the time to get to know your patients and help your team identify their needs. Students often have more time to elicit important social factors that impact outcomes. A great side benefit is that, by knowing your patients well, you are more likely to remember associated clinical details and pearls.

“Let’s say someone came into the hospital with a case of pneumonia, and you treated it and it improved. One of the best things you can do is get to know that patient, and that way it’s actually a study aid,” said Michael J. Rigby, an MD-PhD student in the University of Wisconsin-Madison Medical Scientist Training Program who just completed his clinical rotations.

“The more you know about that patient, their personal life, who they are, what they do, you are actually going to help yourself root that concept in memory,” Rigby said. “So, getting to know the patients on your team can actually be very helpful for your own academic needs.”

Don’t ignore the dress code

Professional attire can help you make the right first impression with your patients.

“How you look definitely has an impact on your appearance of confidence,” Rigby said. “You’re wearing scrubs or professional attire. Basically, if you’re seeing a patient, you should look as if you’re an attending or resident.

“Residents tend to be a bit more lax with their appearance. They get a pass because they are overworked, but definitely medical students have to look the part,” he added.