What it’s like to specialize in emergency medicine: Shadowing Dr. Eiting

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Staff News Writer

As a medical student, do you ever wonder what it’s like to specialize in emergency medicine? Meet AMA member Erick Eiting, MD, a featured physician in the AMA’s “Shadow Me” Specialty Series, which offers advice directly from physicians about life in their specialties. Check out his insights to help determine whether a career in emergency medicine might be a good fit for you.

“Shadowing” Dr. Eiting.

Specialty: Emergency medicine.

Practice setting: Hospital.

Employment type: Academic faculty practice.

Years in practice: Eight.

A typical day and week in my practice: I split my time between clinical practice, teaching residents,
administrative duties and research.

**The most challenging and rewarding aspects of emergency medicine:** I often tell people that I have the privilege of taking care of some patients on the worst day of their lives, and it can sometimes be difficult to watch people while they are seriously ill. We definitely have moments in emergency medicine where we literally save lives, and that feels pretty great.

**Three adjectives to describe the typical day in emergency medicine:** Exciting, challenging and, at times, overwhelming.

**How my lifestyle matches, or differs from, what I had envisioned:** It’s very different. We cover a lot of nights and weekends in emergency medicine, as well as holidays. This can pose challenges when friends and family expect you to be available at these times. But the ability to cluster clinical time provides additional freedom. I have many friends who will work a string of night shifts and then travel on a regular basis.

**Skills every physician in training should have for emergency medicine but won’t be tested for on the board exam:** Most people who come to the emergency department (ED) do not have a life-threatening emergency, but each of them has a concern that led them to believe that the ED was the most appropriate place for them to go. The question we ask ourselves about every patient is whether our patients can be safely discharged. Some patients are not always forthcoming with information, so building the skill set with which you can pull vital information from patients is really important.

**One question physicians in training should ask themselves before pursuing a career in emergency medicine:** Am I ready to make the commitment to regularly working nights and weekends? Emergency medicine has become much more competitive, and many of the people who gravitate to the field are attracted to the lifestyle of working fewer clinical hours than other specialties. But people who really do not enjoy working nights and weekends are likely to experience burnout early on in their careers.

**Books every medical student interested in emergency medicine should be reading:** One of the most important things to do for students is to make your best effort to get your questions answered in real time. Looking up conditions and articles on places like UpToDate at the time when you are caring for patients helps to provide a context to the content. I also support finding a good evidence-based podcast for regular updates I’m partial to “EM:RAP,” since I worked with many of the people at the University of Southern California who developed it.

**Quick insights I would give students who are considering in emergency medicine:** Spend some time learning more about mental health and its impacts. A surprising large number of ED visits are somehow related to mental health in one form or another. Understanding more about patients’ mental health issues can be really helpful, particularly when trying to answer the question about the ability to
provide a safe discharge for a patient.

More about choosing a specialty

The AMA’s Specialty Guide simplifies medical students’ specialty selection process, highlight major specialties, detail training information, and provide access to related association information. It is produced by FREIDA™, the AMA Residency & Fellowship Database®.