

# Hitting the road for rotations? How you can thrive during aways

JUN 8, 2022

**Brendan Murphy**

Senior News Writer

Doing a rotation at an institution other than your own can be a good opportunity to see how things are done at an institution other than the one at which you have the vast majority of your medical school training. It also can be a good way to get face time with faculty or test drive a specialty before you apply.

The 2021–2022 academic year again gave medical students the opportunity to do away rotations after COVID-19 had shut them down for the previous two years. For those pondering or planning on doing away rotations in the coming months, here is some guidance from a recent medical student who found the away experience helpful.

## Know when aways are most needed

In a survey conducted before the pandemic put rotations largely on hold, about half of graduating medical student respondents said they did at least one rotation at an institution other than their own. The necessity of away rotations for residency applications is largely specialty dependent. Your academic adviser can likely give you guidance about the need for away rotations in your chosen specialty.

ChiuYing Cynthia Kuk, MD (who uses they/them/their pronouns), a recent graduate of the Michigan State University College of Human Medicine, was considering emergency medicine (EM) and combined emergency medicine and internal medicine residency (EM/IM) programs. Because the EM residency application relies heavily on standardized letters of evaluation from emergency medicine faculty, Dr. Kuk knew that at least one away rotation would be helpful to bolster their application.

Learn more with the AMA about the pros and cons of away rotations.

## Make the most of your test drive

Dr. Kuk's rotation at the Hennepin County Medical Center (HCMC) Department of Emergency Medicine, in Minneapolis, took them hundreds of miles away from home. The rotation at HCMC is very different from their EM experience in Grand Rapids, giving them a more well-rounded view of the specialty as a whole.

Dr. Kuk said they were looking at both EM and internal medicine/emergency medicine residency positions. Because of that they prioritized getting an away rotation at a health system that offered both EM/IM residency positions as well as categorical EM residency positions. That allowed them to interface with program directors from both specialties during the rotation.

Dr. Kuk matched to such a residency training program at North Shore University Hospital and Long Island Jewish Medical Center, part of Northwell Health in New York state.

"Away rotations are a month-long interview," Dr. Kuk said. "But the interview goes both ways. As a student, you get a fuller picture of a program during an away. You get to see how the department is run, and you get to interact with both the attending and the residents to see whether you fit into their cultures. I highly recommend doing an away rotation on programs you plan on ranking at the top of your list. Furthermore, if you are interested in a small field like combined EM/IM, away rotation also signals true interest on your application."

Find out more with the AMA about when to do key medical school rotations.

## Express enthusiasm

The culture at your away rotation may be different. Dr. Kuk found HCMC offered more autonomy and they embraced it. "I found that preceptors often respond positively when I am honest and open about my expectation and what I would like to do." Dr. Kuk said.

"I would tell residents that I was comfortable with doing whatever they were comfortable with me doing," Dr. Kuk said. "One of the residents was really impressed with me when we had a pediatric patient that needed a finger abscess drained. I had never done it."

## Communicate and connect

There are considerations that extend beyond the clinical realm when it comes to away rotations.

“Beside medicine, away rotations are also a great way to check out the location beyond the four walls of the hospitals,” Dr. Kuk said. “You will be spending some of your busiest years in this location, it is important to know you like the place you live in beyond the hospital system.”

Dr. Kuk also recommended using a messaging app to connect with other students doing away rotations.

“It makes a difference when you are in a new place,” Dr. Kuk said. “While it is exciting to check out new places, it can feel isolating to be away from friends and family for a month. Hanging out with other students on away rotations helps with the isolation and help builds future connections.”

Explore the AMA Succeeding in Medical School series to discover resources and guidance on how to make the most of medical school. Learn more about preparing for USMLE exams, navigating clinical rotations, publishing scientific research, and maintaining optimal health and wellness.

## Look around for lower rents

For some medical students, cost is a barrier to considering away rotations. At first, Dr. Kuk learned about prohibitively expensive housing choices for the Minneapolis away rotation, but then said they leveraged their “queer network” to find a cheaper option.

“We are all med student on limited means. It is very important to use your resources,” Dr. Kuk said. “Contact your school alumni, see if anyone is living near the place you are going to rotation. I am a member of the AMA Medical Student Section. There is a spreadsheet with people offering places to stay and dates they need accommodation. Medicine is a pricy endeavor, we have to lean on one another for support.”

The Coalition for Physician Accountability, a cross-organizational group of medical education stakeholders of which the AMA is a part, is considering in greater depth the multiple functions and value of away rotations for applicants, medical schools and residency programs.