WHAT IS CLINICAL EXPERIENCE AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Clinical experience is vital. In health fields, it works like an internship to help you have exposure to a career you are considering. It can confirm your interest in the field as well as show admissions committees that you have a strong understanding of what you are getting into and will give you experiences that you will be able to use to show (rather than tell) admissions committees how and why you are a strong candidate. Having tangible, active experiences will strengthen your application and help you stay focused when things might get tough (for example, Organic Chemistry and the MCAT or DAT!!).

Additionally, many types of programs such as physician assistant, occupational therapy, and physical therapy specify how many hours of clinical exposure they expect for a competitive applicant. Finally, programs may differ in that they consider a clinical experience. For example, some physician assistant programs do not consider scribing a clinical experience since it does not involve direct contact with patients. **You need to look carefully at the program requirements/recommendations/expectations of a variety of schools that you are thinking of applying to.**

Entry-level/exploration experience:

Shadowing- Again, this is the most basic form and the "starter" level of experience. Shadowing is usually passive, with little or no patient care involvement. It is a great way to test the waters and forge opportunities for mentorship from the people you shadow. But, you really need more active involvement before you apply. In our experience, shadowing alone is no longer sufficient.

Volunteering – Depending on the position, this may also be an entry level way to gain exposure and experience in careers you are considering. For example, most hospital volunteering is not patient care. It is service (helping others with no direct benefit to yourself) and can give you a sense of what it is like to spend time in a hospital setting and to see the different roles of medical care teams. Training and serving as an EMT, on the other hand, is more active and involved, in terms of patient care.
Also, volunteering does not have to be in a strictly health related setting. If you are passionate about other areas that help people and would like to volunteer in those settings, that is great, too.

More active clinical experiences:

Aspiring medical and dental students should have had more active roles in their chosen fields by the time they apply.

Some common examples are EMT, medical assistant, dental assistant, certified nursing assistant, hospice volunteer, medical scribe, patient care technician, clinical research, home health care aid.

How do I find such experiences:

Many students start by exploring personal contacts obtained from their own health care providers, family, friends, and contacts obtained through networking sites such as LinkedIn.

The HPO also has some opportunities on our website under the “Special Programs/ Clinical Programs” tab. We also send out information on jobs, internships, and summer opportunities via our mailing list, which you are automatically subscribed to when you open a file with our office.

Be sure to use a wide range of resources including internship and job postings with Rutgers Career Exploration and Success along with sites such as Indeed, LinkedIn and the Health & Medical subsection of the daily job listings on Craigslist.

On a final note, remember that admission to most post graduate health programs is very competitive and good grades and standardized test scores are the foundation of a strong application. If getting clinical experience while juggling your academics starts to affect your grades, you can use a gap year*, or two, to build experience. Often the experience gained during gap years is more participatory and hands on and that is more powerful support for your application than passive activities such as shadowing.