

Finding Health Care-related Volunteer Opportunities

Volunteering in a health care-related opportunity or organization will benefit you in addition to enhancing your medical school application. It's a chance to see if you enjoy working in the health or medical field, network with like-minded peers, take on increased responsibility and leadership roles, and build your resume.

Where can I find out about opportunities?

If you are still in school, your first step should be to talk to your academic or pre-health advisor. Also, check to see if there is an office of community service or student activities on campus that maintains a website or database. Be sure to join premed or service clubs since they're one of the best ways to hear about volunteer openings, make friends, and find out about opportunities, conferences, resources, and research positions for premeds. You can also contact hospitals, clinics, labs, research facilities, charities, foundations, or other organizations directly as many have volunteer opportunities listed online.

What types of volunteer experiences are best?

Although you'll benefit from almost any type of volunteer experience, it's best to find a health care-related opportunity. You want to search for an opportunity that genuinely interests you so that you'll enjoy the experience, be motivated to stick with it, and learn from it. You may need to try a few different volunteer experiences until you discover one that will be a good long-term fit, but don't do something just because you think it will "look good." When you talk about your experiences during medical school interviews, it will be easier if you're passionate and invested in the health care work in which you've participated.

Is it better to have one on-going experience, or many different experiences?

It's good to have a variety of experiences, but it's also important to show you've cultivated specific interests and are able to commit to an activity over a sustained period of time. You're more likely to gain significant responsibilities or leadership roles if you volunteer with an organization regularly. This also helps you network and develop relationships with potential mentors and other people who may potentially write your letters of recommendation.

What about non-medically-related experiences?

If you're interested in something not related to medicine, don't be afraid to pursue it. Most volunteer experiences are valuable and will provide you with well-rounded experiences. Just make sure you have at least one solid health care-related experience, in addition to your non-medical volunteer work, so that your experiences speak to your commitment to medicine.

What's the best way to maximize my opportunities during an experience?

"One thing that I always tell students is to make the most of the opportunity they participate in by advocating for themselves," says Lisa Kooperman, assistant dean of studies and director of the Office for Fellowships and Pre-health Advising at Vassar College. "If they find themselves in a hospital for instance, pushing papers, I tell them to befriend a nurse, a PA, a radiologist... or other health care practitioner and ask if they can get more involved. Their motivation is likely to be met with some extra responsibilities that will get them more exposure and respect. It's important to build relationships throughout the experience as a way of learning more about the field, and it can often lead to a strong letter of recommendation."

How can I document these experiences? Should I ask for a letter post-experience?

Start maintaining a resume that documents where you volunteer, when, and who supervised you. You can also keep a journal about your experiences to reference when it comes time to write your personal statements and essays for medical school. It never hurts to ask for a letter of recommendation if you've volunteered somewhere long enough for the writer to get to know you and your goals.

RELATED FACT SHEETS

Getting Lab Experience

www.aamc.org/students/aspiring/experience/280610/lab-experience.html

Shadowing a Doctor

www.aamc.org/students/aspiring/experience/280582/shadow-doctor.html