

WORK OBSERVATION GUIDELINES FOR SCHOOL STUDENTS

Introduction

Practices are often contacted by schools or school students asking about the possibility of coming to the practice for work experience. These are usually prospective medical students, and may be as young as 15. While practices should always feel able to decline such requests, they often feel under pressure to say yes, but are left uneasy about the situation. The LMC has, therefore, formulated guidance that practices are encouraged to use or adapt for their own use.

Work observation v work experience

Work observation is when a student spends time observing a doctor's work. It is often called "shadowing" or "work experience". The term work observation will help observers to have realistic expectations of how their time will be spent and to understand that they can only observe doctor's work. They will not be able to participate in any clinical work.

Work observation with a GP should only be seen as one way for students to get information about a medical career. Various guides, a BMA video called "A stressful shift", and a reading list can all be obtained from <http://web.bma.org.uk/homepage.nsf/htmlpagevw/careers>. Volunteering for work in a hospice, nursing home, or day centre may also give the prospective student valuable insights. A practice should, therefore, not feel pressured into saying yes to a request for a student placement. There are plenty of other opportunities available.

Confidentiality

Doctors must emphasise the importance of patient confidentiality to observers. They should make sure that the observers are sent information about confidentiality before they begin their placement. Doctors must also talk to the observers about the importance of confidentiality at the start of the attachment. They must be satisfied that the student is mature and responsible enough to understand the principles of confidentiality. It would therefore be the normal practice to require a student to be at least in the sixth form of school. Doctors are ultimately responsible for any breaches of confidentiality that may occur. A draft confidentiality agreement is attached to these guidelines, but even if the student signs this the doctor is still potentially responsible for any breaches.

To try and reduce potential problems it is suggested that work observation takes place outside the observer's immediate locality, to reduce the chances of meeting someone they know. It would also be advisable to ask for a reference from either a schoolteacher or their parents.

Knowing the limits

All staff within the practice need to know and agree the boundaries of the work observation. Observers also need to know the limits of their position.

Observers should only be present during consultations if patients have given their permission. Ideally this should be in writing. Doctors, or someone they delegate to do the task, must discuss with the patient prior to the consultation that someone would like to watch the consultation, but that this requires their consent. The patient needs to be told who the observer is, in case the patient knows the observer, and why s/he wants to observe. The patient needs time to consider this and they should be made to feel that there is no undue pressure for them to agree. Doctors need to

make sure that the patient understands that they can ask the observer to leave at any point in the consultation without prejudice to their treatment.

A notice should be placed in the waiting room informing patients of the fact that a student is present within the practice on work observation, but that they will only be present in the consultation with the express permission of the patient. Doctors must still speak to each patient prior to a consultation even if a notice is used.

Students should not be involved in any clinical tasks, such as minor operations. Care should also be taken to protect observers from witnessing traumatic events, without prior warning.

MODEL CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

I understand that the information received about patients held by this practice is confidential and that this confidentiality is permanent. I have received education and training on this matter.

I have read and understood the practice policy on confidentiality, and agree to be bound by its terms. I undertake not to disclose personal information learnt in the course of my presence in the practice to anybody outside the practice. If I feel disclosure is necessary in the public, patient or family interest I will discuss this with the appropriate health professional.

I understand that a breach of this obligation may result in my work observation being terminated and that other appropriate action may be taken.

Signed.....

Date.....

Name.....

Address.....