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Keith Sovang  
*Lake Forest College*

Brittany Stern  
*Lake Forest College*

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Cutting into the Medical Field: Shadowing Surgeons

Brittany Stern and Keith Solvang
Department of Biology
Lake Forest College
Lake Forest, Illinois 60045

Brittany Stern '11
I am a true believer that to know what you want to do for the rest of your life, you have to experience it. Whether your professional goals surround finance, law, or medicine, living a day “in the shoes” of a person in that profession is essential. Although most pre-medical students are encouraged to shadow, shadowing carries more value than just a spot on your resume. Shadowing has solidified my aspirations to become a physician and has given me the push I need to excel academically for these last two years of college. Since high school, I have shadowed many physicians, including an emergency room doctor, neonatologist, gastroenterologist, obstetrician, and pediatric urologist.

This past summer I had a unique shadowing experience with Dr. Max Maizels, a pediatric urologist from Children’s Memorial Hospital in Chicago. Dr. Maizels is creating a residency training program which can be accessed worldwide by any registered doctor through the internet. This program, called CEVL (Computer Enhanced Visual Learning), has the potential to revolutionize the way that training physicians learn surgical procedures. Although CEVL began dominated by pediatric urology procedures, it is expanding to encompass many other medical specialties. Dr. Maizels needed assistance videotaping and taking still-shots of his surgical procedures and putting together the material in presentations which take the resident step-by-step through surgeries. I have always been most interested in pediatrics, so working on this project with Dr. Maizels at Children's Memorial Hospital this summer seemed like a perfect fit.

For two days a week last summer, I went up to the surgical floor, changed into blue surgical scrubs, put on a scrub cap over my hair, and walked into the operating room suites. I met with Dr. Maizels and his residents and listed as the surgeries of the day were discussed along with potential complications and follow-up treatment. The shadowing experience with Dr. Maizels was unlike any other I have ever had. Not only was I allowed in the operating room with him, but he also took the time out of his day to sit with me before the surgeries and draw out “storyboards”, as he called them, to explain each maneuver in the procedure. During the entire five-hour surgeries, he would call out “Brittany, what’s the next step in this procedure?” Looking at my storyboard, I would tell him. I never thought that shadowing could be as hands-on and involved as the experience that I had with this doctor. I would leave the hospital those days with 20 pieces of paper taped together that, when unraveled, revealed such things as how to repair an obstructed ureter in an infant. I would go home and, while looking at the storyboards and the video of the surgery, construct presentations that will soon be online for residents around the world to learn from.

Shadowing allows a pre-medical student some of the best opportunities to gain first-hand experience to understand what it is truly like to be a physician. Even small moments like eating lunch with the new residents gave me glimpse into the everyday life of a doctor. I listened to the complaints, the joys, and the challenges of internship and residency and thoroughly enjoyed every moment of it. Surgeons can be the most intense and brilliant of all doctors, and shadowing them can further motivate the pre-medical student to achieve his or her goals.

Keith Solvang '11
When I was younger I thought I wanted to be a doctor. The only difference between today and when I was eight is that now I know I want to be a doctor. This dramatic change occurred after a life changing event. In August 2009, I came into communication with Dr. Akhter, a cardiothoracic surgeon at the University of Chicago. I had opened my e-mail on a bright Friday morning while working in Dr. DebBurman’s lab, and noticed that I had received an e-mail back from Dr. Akhter confirming I would be able to shadow open heart surgeries for the next five weeks. I was overwhelmed with excitement and anticipated the day when I could go to see the surgeon performing thrilling maneuvers and saving healing patients. During the next few days, I was able to jump into a pair of blue scrubs, put on a fashionable hair net, and wear a mask that made me beg for more air. However, it did not matter because I was finally able to see an open-heart surgery.

My first surgery was a coronary bypass, and it was amazing to witness. The best part about it was that going into surgery you believe that the surgeons are like super heroes of medicine. You go into the operating room feeling like you will see the most miraculous sight you have ever seen. Interestingly, I learned that surgery is an imperfect science. The surgeons do not make perfect slices; they are not masters of coordination. Like anything else, as Dr. Akhter told me, “Surgery is just like a sport: you get better with practice and the best are going to be the doctors who have put their all into what they do.” I may be over exaggerating when I say there is no skill. Surgery requires skill and knowledge of the coronaries and the heart. I appreciated seeing the surgery. Even though surgeons are thought to be untouchable, once you step inside the operating room and see them pick up a tool that resembles a soldering iron, it seems like he was just scribbling on a piece of paper. However, to this unorganized madness of scribbling and using a saw to cut the sternum, there was finesse and creativity that the surgeon possessed. When Dr. Akhter finished with the bypass and the patient was closed up, I remember thinking to myself, “I cannot wait until next Friday.” Again, the wait was long, but for the next five weeks I went in every Friday and got to see magic happen.

Ever since my shadowing experience, I have realized I do not just want to be a doctor anymore; I am going to be a doctor. This is why I believe that shadowing is an important event for any pre-medical student. Whether the shadowing is in oncology, neurosurgery, or just a general practitioner, there is no other place that a student can get this type of experience. Without shadowing, a student may never know if they can handle the unorganized madness of the profession they are choosing to go into. Thus, if applying to medical school, dental school, veterinary school, or any other professional school with focusing on health, make sure to shadow a professional in that field and get the experience of a lifetime that could end up changing your own life.

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