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More than a Shadow: Entering the Medical Field as an EMT

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Students interested in a medical profession are very used to searching near and far for those special opportunities to be immersed in the medical field. Most students rely on shadowing, volunteering, and medical research to gain the exposure they seek. A less utilized opportunity is that of becoming an emergency medical technician, or EMT. With EMT training and licensure, one can finally obtain direct patient contact and interactions. My time as an EMT has fortified my desire to enter the medical field.

My first shift at Waukegan Vista East Hospital was a rainy Friday from eight pm to six am. I had previously shadowed plenty of physicians and walked through the hospital doors many times but today was different. Today I walked into the hospital in scrubs with a stethoscope around my neck, ready for my first day of hands-on training as an EMT.

My EMT course began early May the summer after my freshmen year of college. I have always desired the type of hands-on patient interaction that shadowing and volunteering usually cannot provide. Therefore, the six-week accelerated EMT course at the College of Lake County (CLC) seemed a perfect fit. The course was demanding and time-consuming. It met Monday-Thursday 6-10pm, with ten-hour clinical shifts usually scheduled on the weekends. Although it was tough at times, the lesson plans were amazingly fun and educational. We usually learned patient care techniques on each other or on the dummies provided for us. There were even cardboard cars that simulated car accidents, which we used to learn excavation techniques. The eight instructors constantly came up with elaborate and challenging symptoms and complaints that we needed to piece together to correctly diagnose and “treat” in the field.

After the first few weeks of the course, we could sign up for our clinical hours at Vista East Hospital. At this point, we had already learned basic patient care techniques like taking blood pressures and glucose levels, as well as more advanced procedures like intubation (helping insert a breathing tube) and stabilizing fractures. I had no idea what to expect as I walked into the emergency department that Friday for the first time. The first few hours were relatively calm, with patients suffering from only minor injuries. Once midnight hit, the chaos began. That night I stabilized a wrist fracture on a teenage girl, administered high-flow oxygen to a woman having a heart attack, kept constant pressure for an entire hour on a man who cut his wrist on a piece of metal, and performed four EKGs (to monitor the heart).

Just as I thought my night was calming down, a disoriented man entered the hospital. Little did I know, I was about to be thrown into my first “sink or swim” moment in the medical field. He said he had been drinking and started to feel ill. I took his blood pressure, which was alarmingly high. Within minutes, he became unconscious and began seizing. All of the doctors and nurses hurried to his room and began administering medications and getting the crash cart ready. My mentor at the hospital, a technician named Tommy, looked over at me and asked for me to assist. I helped intubate the patient with a breathing tube and ventilated him for half hour by squeezing the bag so oxygen could enter his body. Tommy looked at me and said, “Look what you’re doing. You are breathing for him. You are keeping him alive.” This was an exhilarating moment for me and one that I will never forget. Not many people get the opportunity to hold life in their hands. That day I learned more than just how to resuscitate a patient. I learned that even with the best life-saving efforts, not everyone survives. The man died from a ruptured brain aneurysm a few hours later. Lessons like these are ones that not many college students get the chance to learn. Although he did not survive, many lives were saved that night.

After the state or national EMT test is passed, there are many opportunities and different places where one can work or volunteer as an EMT. Ambulance companies constantly need EMTs, and even offer summer work. Hospitals may hire EMTs as patient care technicians in their emergency departments. Last summer, I decided to volunteer as an EMT at DuPage Community Clinic, a free clinic in Wheaton. Here I am able to take patient’s vitals and histories and work with the doctors to decide the best course of treatment.

Almost all pre-medical students get the chance to shadow or observe physicians in a variety of medical fields. Most of us also have the opportunity to volunteer in a hospital and see first-hand how a hospital runs. Becoming an EMT takes these experiences to an entirely different level. With this license, I am able to directly interact with patients. I have the opportunity to provide life-saving techniques and help diagnose and provide treatment for seriously ill people. I would strongly encourage students interested in the medical field to take an EMT course and learn what it is really like to hold a life in your hands.

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