

Role of the Clinical Preceptor

First and foremost, faculty in an academic setting realizes that we cannot be successful in our clinical courses without the help of volunteer clinical preceptors. Our clinical preceptors are people who love to teach, receive great satisfaction out of helping our students in their learning process, and probably, most of all, enjoy the “aha” response that occurs when a student finally makes the connection between theory and clinical application.

We know that teaching is not the full-time job for the preceptor. If it has been a long time since the preceptor has had a student or if this is the preceptor’s first time to teach, he or she must remember that it takes a few days to get into a routine related to teaching. Please, keep in mind that those first few days of a clinical rotation are critical for the student who has to adapt to a new clinical environment and sometimes more than one new preceptor.

Taking a little time for orientation and clarification of the expectations of the student and the preceptor can help each clinical get off to a good start. While the first day of the clinical rotation is usually hectic, taking the time to orient the student on that first day may save the preceptor time and energy for the remainder of the clinical rotation. In addition, a systematic orientation helps the preceptor design the clinical experiences around the student’s particular needs and provides a framework for giving the student feedback and a structure for evaluating them.

Helpful Hints for Clinical Teaching:

Orient the Student to the Clinical Setting

- Help the student become familiar with the environment, i.e. where to hang their coats, location of the restroom, when to take breaks, and general rules such as handwashing, etc. Be sure to introduce them to the staff.

Clarify Your Expectations to the Student

- Discuss what you expect from the patient encounter and repeat information as appropriate.
- Expect the student to be an active learner
- Once the student is comfortable with the clinical routine and you are comfortable with the student, allow the student some independence in the learning environment.
- Revise your expectations as the student progresses.
- Keep in mind that the preceptor is responsible for guiding the student’s clinical education and for completing the evaluation.
- When discussing expectations, remember that the course objectives, the student’s expectations and your expectations are all relevant to the student’s clinical rotation.
- Establish 5-7 clinical objectives with the student.
- The clearer you can be in discussing your expectations with the student, the more likely they are to be met and the easier it is to hold the student accountable if they fall short of the expectations.

Provide Constructive Feedback

- Immediate feedback is most effective. Correct a misunderstood situation or mistake as soon as it happens.

- Provide feedback at regular intervals in the clinical day. You can also discuss other patient situations at lunch, after rounds, or at the end of the clinical day.
- When meeting with the student, you will need to refer back to the clinical objectives and make sure you are still on track. Setting expectations accomplishes little if it is not combined with feedback to the student about whether they are meeting those expectations. Revise objectives if they are unrealistic or if you have identified other areas that need to be addressed instead.
- Final evaluation should have no surprises. If you have initially stated clear expectations, developed mutually agreed upon objectives, and given consistent feedback about the student's performance in relation to those objectives throughout the rotation, your final (end-rotation) evaluation of their performance should be as expected by the student and the clinical advisor.

Share the Student with Other Staff

- Prepare a list of the patients, their diagnosis(es) and treatment regime available for the student to review. You can either select the patient for the student or allow the student to choose the patient that would provide the best learning experience.
- Encourage the student to interact with other staff who can help when the primary preceptor is scheduled off.

Students Need to Learn How the Clinical Environment Functions

- Familiarize the student with the various functions of the staff and any ancillary staff
- The ancillary staff can provide great insights for the student.
- Assist the student in learning the order of communication or "pecking order" in the unit.

Being a Preceptor May Help to Prevent Burnout

- Having a student in the clinical environment reminds the preceptor why they enjoy their profession.
- The student will ask you challenging questions. These questions require you to provide a rationale for the treatment regime of the patient.
- Additionally, it gives you the opportunity to re-evaluate the treatment approach related to a certain conditions.
- Not only do preceptors teach, but they also learn by teaching.

Keep Family informed of the Student's Participation in Their Child's Care

- It is important that the family be informed of the presence of the student and their role in their child's care.
- The family may request that the student not be involved in their infant's care. The student should understand this request and another person should take over the care of that infant.

Be a Role Model

- Role models can be a strong influence in the student's professional choices. They usually are able to problem solve effectively, resolve conflicts, and identify alternative answers for unusual situations.
- A preceptor who respects the student and colleagues and shows empathy, a sense of humor, enthusiasm, and dependability is highly valued.

Sample Topic Areas

Orientation

Introduction to the Clinical Environment

- Student's work space, reference materials available
- Dress code: name tag? lab coat? scrubs? business attire? how formal?
- Parking & phone system
- Staff introductions and roles
- Unique learning opportunities (clinical activities, patient population, provider interests)

Overview of the Clinical Rotation

- How clinical rotation fits into the student's career plans
- Address clinical objectives
- Hours & days for clinical experiences

Clarifying Expectations

Course Expectations:

Course objectives
Evaluation criteria

Student's Objectives

Specific knowledge, skills, attitudes sought
Grade expectations

Preceptor Expectations

Daily routine: clinical hours
Clinical policies: documentation
Values: interaction with staff, patient & families; be an active learner
Preceptor and student interaction: how to present cases
If a problem arises: absentee policy, emergency contact, how to contact Clinical Faculty
Clinical rotation objectives based on clinical environment's unique learning opportunities

Clinical Rotation Timeline

Before the Student's Arrival

Review the course objectives & evaluation form
Identify your own expectations as a preceptor
Solicit staff help in orienting learner
Block out time(s) to meet with the student

The Student's Arrival

Orient to clinical environment
Assess the student's clinical level & background
Discuss course, student's and your own expectations for clinical rotation
Agree on 5-7 clinical objectives & write them down for reference
Tell staff clinical objectives, so they can call student in for relevant cases as appropriate.

The Clinical Experience

Refer to expectations and objectives as you give the student feedback on patient encounters, cases presented, during daily debriefing, and at mid-rotation evaluation
Make sure that all staff notifies student during clinical days when procedures and other opportunities related to objectives present

End of the Clinical

Refer to expectations & clinical objectives as you evaluate the student
Collect feedback & note changes needed in process of setting expectations for next clinical rotation

Reference:

Seim, H.C. & Johnson, O.G. (1999). Clinical preceptors: Tips for effective teaching with minimal downtime. *Family Medicine*, 31, 538-9. Retrieved on April 6, 2008 from <http://www.stfm.org/teacher/1999/sept/sept.html>