

Written by: Dr. Ali Hassan Mushtaq

NAVIGATING YOUR INTERNSHIP YEAR

Dr. Ali Hassan Mushtaq is a 9th batch alumnus from Alfaisal University, currently in his intern year. He has been involved in extensive research, teaching, and mentorship during his time at Alfaisal, namely as a tutor in the PAL program and the USMLE prep course 2021. He writes about how to navigate through internship with special tips on clinical electives.

Obtaining Electives

A US hospital-based work experience in a clinical specialty like Surgery/Medicine allows one to get acquainted with the routine functioning of the US healthcare environment: history taking and physical examination, using EPIC (Electronic Medical Record), and providing assessment and management plans. However, the primary goal of an elective for an IMG is securing LORs (Letters Of Recommendations) and interview spots for the upcoming Match.

Your goal is to secure clinical electives within the 12 months of internship. The best type of clerkship is a sub-internship where you have the added responsibility of on-call participation and treatment similar to a PGY1, but this differs from one institute to another.

The process is tough and lengthy; be prepared for many rejections. Most institutions host only their students or medical students accredited by the Liaison Committee on Medical Education (LCME) or Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society (ΑΩΑ). To optimize your chances, start the process early, preferably right after finishing 5th year. Some institutions require you to apply at least 6 months in advance, but most have a window period of 3 to 6 months before the start of your rotation date.

While most electives appear on VLSO (Visiting Student Learning Opportunities), quite a few require you to apply to individual institutes. Online forms can be found on their websites or simply email en masse to medical education coordinators.

Another way is to employ 'the wasta card': contacts, family friends, relatives in the US, whoever it may be, reach out and ask. Aim for a hands-on elective. However, a hands-on observership is also quite useful.

Things I wish I knew

- The experience one individual has in year X will be different in year Y, simply due to changing situations (e.g. COVID) and new collaborations being established.
- Not all doctors are going to hand out LORs. You will get rejected so take the feedback positively and work on yourself to make improvements.
- Avoid comparing your experience with another individual in the same institute. It depends on various factors, most of which are out of your control. Do the best you can and enjoy the experience.

Requirements

Try to finish a few prerequisites while searching for electives:

- Letters of recommendations
- USMLE Step 1 (required by many institutes)
- Personal statement: Convey your passion for the specialty, your accomplishments and how they have developed you as a person, your future plans, and how this experience in their institute will help you to accomplish those goals.
- CV: Structured, to the point, highlighting professional accomplishments.
- Letter of good standing: Mentions that you are in good standing, have completed core clinical clerkships and all courses have been taught in English (obtained by emailing Ms. Mariam Tabrizi).
- Make an account on VSAS (Visiting Student Application Service)
- Complete the AAMC (Association of American Medical Colleges) immunization form
- Criminal Background Check/Police Clearance: from the local police station (obtain a letter from the university to facilitate the process)
- HIPAA and OSHA certifications (some institutes)
- Valid BLS Certificate
- School final transcript
- TOEFL (some require a score of 26 or 28 in speaking and listening)
- B1/B2 Visa (usually after acceptance, since you need them to send it to you)
- Extras: Malpractice/ professional liability insurance, urine drug screen (some institutes)

May Allah make this journey easy for all of us! Keep us in your prayers!

Obtaining Electives

- At this point you may be unsure on what you want to peruse. A good way to make that decision is by the process of elimination. Do you absolutely hate the OR setting, refuse to stand for hours and hours during internal medicine rounds, do you simply dislike dealing with adolescents or do you want to take the ROAD to easy life (Radiology, Ophthalmology, Anesthesia, Dermatology). Make sure you know what route you want to take. You can choose to apply to multiple specialties during the match process (IM and family medicine).
- Look at the prospects; salary offered, work/life balance (working hours, how many weeks do they work each year), chance of matching. Residency is a grueling process, and the institution you train at will dictate your fellowship options and employability in popular states.
- If you want neurosurgery, which is one of the most competitive options out there, don't give up simply because its difficult. People have matched there but they did put it significantly more effort than other specialties (a few years of research in US). But be realistic; you reap what you sow.

Getting letters of recommendations (LORs)

Show interest, participate and get along with your colleagues. Ask questions, act interested and participate in discussions. Be careful, don't overdo it. Everyone wants to leave early so a few questions here and there are acceptable but to question everything will annoy others and effect you negatively. Another vital point is to be interesting, some of my closest friends secured LORs based on discussions about novels and the stock market. Your performance will atleast for IM be gauged by your presentation skills, using the SOAP criteria. Most important aspect of your presentation includes your assessment of the patient and the tailored management plan. If you do not know simply point that out. Do not give false/ inaccurate information. Best way to excel at this is by having open □ Participate in discussions and ask questions but be careful not to overdo it. Everyone wants to leave early so a few questions here and there are acceptable but questioning everything will annoy others and affect you negatively. Show interest and get along with your colleagues. Some of my closest friends secured LORs based on discussions about novels and the stock market.

Your performance, at least for IM, will be gauged by your presentation skills of the SOAP criteria. The most important aspect of this includes your assessment of the patient and the tailored management plan. If you do not know, simply say so. Do not give false or inaccurate information. The best way to excel at this is by having an open conversation with residents and asking for their feedback before presenting in morning rounds. Many times, the resident may provide tailored plans for you to present if you build a good relationship. Similarly, if a resident is asked a question and you know the answer, do not interject until it is redirected towards the team. Do not try to undermine the residents in any way. They have a say in your residency application and sometimes the attending gets feedback on your performance through them. End of the week, first ask for feedback and how to improve yourself. If you receive a positive response, proceed to humbly inquire if they are willing to write you a LOR and specify its importance for IMGs. If they accept, write them an email mentioning what you have learned with them along with your CV and personal statement. Inform them that they will be required to upload the letter on ERAS (Electronic Residency Application Service) once you get your token, after graduation.

Aim to obtain 4+ LORs. People have matched with 1 or 2 but aim to get at least 4 as not everyone who promised a LOR may deliver when match season approaches. The finest LORs are from institutes like Mayo or Cleveland Clinic, from a core faculty member who writes you a personalized LOR. This is the bar that most students don't get to meet, which is okay. While it may be debatable, a personalized LOR, written by someone you worked with for a long time from a small institute is probably better than a generic one written by someone from a top institute. Alternatively, some program directors would not prefer a LOR from someone who shares your last name or nationality. However, something is better than nothing so don't feel shy in asking, with your residents and asking their feedback before presenting in morning rounds. Many at times, the resident will provide the tailored plans for you to present if you build a relationship.

Choosing the right elective

You may be unsure about which field you want to pursue right now. A good way to make this decision is by the process of elimination: Do you absolutely hate the OR setting, refuse to stand for hours and hours during internal medicine rounds, or simply dislike dealing with adolescents? Do you want to take the 'ROAD to an easy life' (Radiology, Ophthalmology, Anesthesia, Dermatology)? Make sure to decide which route you want to take. You may choose to apply to multiple specialties during the match process (e.g. IM and Family Medicine).

Look at the prospects: salary offered, work/life balance (working hours, weeks per year), and the chance of matching. Residency is a grueling process and the institution you train at will dictate your fellowship options and employability in the popular states.

If you're interested in neurosurgery, one of the most competitive options out there, don't give up simply because it seems difficult. People have matched there, although they had to put in a lot more effort than other specialties (e.g. a few years of research in the US). Above all, be realistic; you reap what you sow.

End of the week, ask for feedback first and what steps need to be taken to improve. If a positive response is received then proceed to asking in a humble manner if they are willing to ask write you an LOR and its importance for us as IMGs. Once they accept, write them an email including what you have learnt with them, your CV and personal statement. Inform them that they will be required to upload the letter on ERAS once you get your token (after graduation).

Your aim is to get 4+ LORs, people have matched with 1/2 but aim to get atleast 4, as not everyone who promised an LOR will deliver when match season approaches

The finest LORs are from institutes like Mayo/ Cleveland/ Yale where you have done a clinical elective, from a core faculty member who writes you a personalized LOR. This is the bar which most students don't get to meet, which is okay.

While it may be debatable, LOR which are personalized, written by someone you worked with for a long time from a small institute is probably better than a generic one written by someone from a top institute. Again, some program directors would not prefer an LOR with someone with your last name or same nationality. Something is better than nothing, don't feel shy asking.

Tips

- Apply as a medical student (includes interns): Considered the highest level of experience a student can obtain in the US, superior to observership/ externships. Inpatient should be prioritized over the ambulatory setting.
- Clinical electives may be done between your 4th and 5th year summer but prioritize your STEP examinations instead
- Complete Step 1 and 2 before going for electives as studying for Step 2 during rotations is difficult (yet not impossible)
- As per university policy, half of your internship in Riyadh can be done in private institutes so finish them in the first 6 months while you prepare for exams and electives.
- Some sub-internships, e.g. Mayo Clinic, may require you to have completed at least one month of USCE (US clinical experience)
- Avail the health insurance discount offered through the IO website.
- Understand that even when thoroughly planned, things may not go your way. You may not get into the program you wanted or have to rent a car to get to different places but in the end, make sure to not make compromises on what you went there to achieve.
- Electives have more to do with your personality and social skills rather than your knowledge. Try to present a reliable, amiable personality.
- Take advice from students who have recently gone through the process as things are rapidly evolving.