

MEDICAL CAREERS**Life in the ER: Not All that Traumatic**

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In the past when people asked about the greatest aspect of being an emergency physician, you could always point out that emergency medicine is the only medical specialty with its own television program. However, with the recent success of programs such as *Nip/Tuck* and *Grey's Anatomy*, our monopoly on the night-time medical soap-opera has come to an end, and a re-evaluation of what makes emergency medicine so unique is required. After extensive reflection we have attempted to define what makes emergency medicine such an attractive career choice.

Most emergency physicians would tell you that flexibility is one of the best, if not *the* best, part of the job. Being free from the responsibilities of managing an office coupled with the opportunity for shift-work allows many scheduling options not available to most other specialties. Essentially, you can work as much or little as you desire, at as many or as few sites as you choose. There are opportunities to practice at large, urban academic centers, or in small, rural community departments; in fact, some physicians do both. You can stack shifts to earn a block of time off, or spread them out and set a reasonable pace. There is time aplenty to focus on educational, administrative, and other academic endeavours. Workaholics can always pick up extra shifts or even work double shifts. Without an office, you have the flexibility to take a vacation or sabbatical without finding a replacement to cover your practice while you are away. It also means you can pick up and move cities or leave the country and practice abroad—two things that are very difficult to do for a physician with his or her own practice. And Call? Forget about it! There are no pagers here. However, for all this freedom, shift-work is one significant trade-off. Working shift-work means logging the majority of your hours in the afternoons and evenings—a schedule which often clashes with friends and family who work ‘banker’s hours.’

After job flexibility, the biggest draw of emergency medicine is the medicine itself; no other specialty offers the same combination of diversity and acuity. The emergency physician is both a generalist and a specialist. Training in emergency

medicine gives you the tools to treat *any* acute medical condition, and experience builds the ingenuity needed to approach those ‘once-in-a-lifetime’ cases. Beyond being the medical equivalent of a ‘jack of all trades’, the emergency physician must be a specialist in resuscitation. For critically ill patients, the initial few minutes of emergency care often determines the final outcome. Thrombolysis in acute myocardial infarction and ischemic stroke, early goal-directed therapy in sepsis, and antibiotics in meningitis, are all excellent examples of timely emergency room interventions which save lives. In fact, the ability to provide expedient care for the very sick patient is what most distinguishes this specialty from others.

However, the emergency ‘style’ of medicine is not for everyone. Tough decisions often need to be made quickly, and without the benefit of much information. It is not uncommon to treat patients who cannot even tell you their name, let alone their past medical history! Furthermore, depending on where you practice, it can be quite challenging to work with the emergency department patient population. Working in an urban center often means providing primary care to the downtown itinerant population, in addition to functioning in all the other roles of an emergency department physician.

How do you know if emergency medicine is the right choice for you? If you enjoy a broad range of acute care medicine in a clinically challenging, fast-paced environment coupled with the ability to maintain a balanced personal lifestyle, this field should be at the top of your list. Being able to think on your feet and quickly make a decision is useful, as is the ability to manage multiple tasks simultaneously. Being good with your hands is an asset, given the multitude of procedures an emergency physician may be called upon to perform. And the ability which separates a great emergency physician from the rest is a talent for teaching on the fly. If these roles sound attractive, find out if emergency medicine is for you. Shadow a physician for a shift or do an elective. The only way to know with certainty is to try it yourself. †

Author Biographies

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