

Elizabeth Kappler

Good Samaritan Health Center Medical Assistant Internship

Final Report

In the last 16 weeks, I have spent each Wednesday and Saturday working part-time as a medical assistant intern at the Good Samaritan Health Center in Atlanta, Georgia. The Good Samaritan Health Center, or as we call it Good Sam, is a nonprofit striving to bring quality healthcare to Atlanta's low-income communities. They provide wholistic care, offering community support programs, health and nutrition education, fitness classes, and medical and dental services on an income-based sliding fee scale. I first learned about Good Sam when the Chief Operations Officer, Breanna Lathrop, came to speak at a leadership conference at the Georgia Institute of Technology where I am a 4th year undergraduate student in biomedical engineering. During Breanna's talk, I was introduced to the concept of social determinants of health. Social determinants of health refer to the environmental and socioeconomic conditions that are, unfortunately, predictors of overall health risk and outcomes. Good Sam is located in the Bankhead neighborhood of Atlanta. By residing in the 30318-zip code, our patients have an average life expectancy 13 years less than that of patients who live in the Buckhead neighborhood, a mere 5 miles away. When I heard the statistics, I was taken aback. It is immensely unjust that some of my neighbors and friends might have different outcomes if they moved a few miles down the road. As a student, I currently live in the 30318-zip code. My long-term career goal is to become a physician, so when the chance to intern at Good Sam opened, I jumped at the opportunity to obtain clinical exposure while helping my very own community.

In my interim report, I detailed many of the new skills I had learned during my first couple months training at Good Sam. Every day was exciting and new. I was learning to draw blood, complete lab tests, run EKGs, use the electronic medical records system, and simply understand the inner workings of a primary care office. In the last few months, I've honed my skills in a few of these areas and can perform many them one my own without hesitation. One time, a group of volunteer medical students

needed to look at the electrical activity of a patient's heart but had never performed an EKG before, so I got to teach them how to run the test! It was a proud moment to look back on how much I had learned.

In conjunction with the happy moments, I also learned about the heaviness that accompanies a career in medicine. There is a sadness that comes with knowing that a patient's diabetes is uncontrolled or that they feel hopeless to change old habits no matter how hard they try. There was also a fear that I would do more harm than good. I've been learning that in my areas of weakness, confidence will eventually come with practice and repetition. But I've also been learning to understand the balance between compassion and competence. Many physicians are reinforced not to show empathy because it can affect their objectivity. Yet, I believe that sometimes patients need the emotional support more than a prescription. It's a balance I am still learning to have and no doubt, will continue to strive for as long as I work in the medical field.

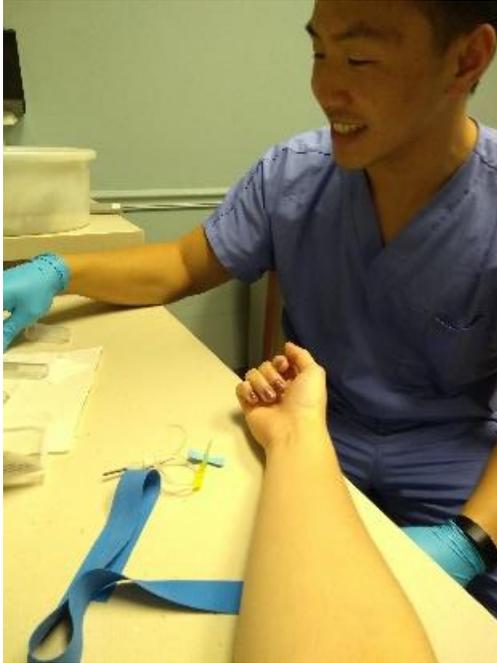
One thing I admire at work is that recently, we began asking patients a series of social history questions to better identify social determinants of health that could be affecting their well-being. For example, one question asks if the patient has missed a doctor's appointment due to a lack of transportation while another asks if the patient has a high school diploma. We ask if they experience abuse at home or if they've felt depressed or hopeless in recent weeks. For our Nurse Practitioners and Physicians, it helps them make better diagnoses and understand the root-cause of conditions, as well as direct them toward resources that meet their needs. Regarding one such area that our community is at risk for, last month I attended the staff "Lunch and Learn" event where we heard from a guest Pediatrician about identifying and treating abuse in children. She pointed out risk factors and spoke about the "circle of abuse" – how parents who were abused as children are most likely to abuse their own kids. Despite being a heavy topic, I was encouraged by the willingness of the entire medical staff – providers, medical assistants, administrators, dentists, and even the guest services team – to sacrifice time out of their days to attend and learn about this topic.

The day-to-day at a primary care clinic is not always glamorous and a lot of my time was spent performing routine tasks that come with the job. While these mundane moments often get overlooked, it

was those times that I was able to look around and appreciate being part of a bigger team. In our downtimes, I formed friendships with the full-time medical assistant staff and they never failed to make me laugh. At the end of my shifts, I could feel good about being tired, knowing I'd used my time well.

As I reflect on the impact of this experience on my future goals, the medical assistant internship at Good Sam has led me to have full assurance that I want to pursue a life in medical service, despite loving engineering. During college, I often wavered in my resolve and even tried out internships in engineering and manufacturing. In fact, last summer, I worked at a medical technologies company that produces lancets and lancing devices for glucose monitoring. At Good Sam, I used those very same products to perform hemoglobin and glucose finger sticks on our patients to check for iron and sugar levels. Most people don't get that chance to see the full life-cycle of a medical product, but once I did, it reinforced that I wanted to be a part of the human side of the equation. I've noticed how my knowledge of the primary care clinic has played a role in some of my engineering projects designing medical devices and I'm certain that my engineering degree will similarly enhance my medical practice in the future. My goal is that I can utilize both, to leverage medical technologies to provide better healthcare and overcome social determinants of health. While medical school and residency are still a long way away, I've tasted what it could be like and there's no looking back now.

I am so grateful for the opportunity to work and learn at Good Sam. While my internship has officially ended, I have decided to continue volunteering at Good Sam through the summer until I graduate from college. I'm thankful for the Jessica Jennifer Cohen Foundation for helping me pursue this dream through financial support and to all the wonderful staff at the Good Samaritan Health Clinic for their training and endless encouragement throughout this experience.



Top Left: A fellow intern is preparing to practice drawing my blood. The easiest way to get better was to practice on each other!

Top Right: Good Samaritan Health Center from the outside. The center is expanding and has recently poured the foundation for a new facility to house exercise classes and community programs.

Bottom Left: Snapping a quick picture in an empty room. One of the few places we can get a picture without infringing on patient privacy!