

Tips for Learning on Inpatient Medicine

Medical school learning is a completely different style of learning from that of a practicing physician. You no longer have days at a time to read and study material. You probably have mastered a certain technique to studying that involves a certain sequence of reading, highlighting or making notecards. Learning from here on will not usually resemble this. It will be vitally important for your progression as a doctor to adapt to a new approach to learning although you should still individualize it to meet your needs. Do not try to keep a list of broad topic areas to read about “later” – this will lead to guilt and is unattainable.

Learn on the job! This is the main point for the rest of this handout! You may be used to having time in the afternoons to read an article or review a topic for a prolonged period of time. Working 40-80 hours a week does not allow for that on a regular basis. All the other tips should help you adapt to learning on the job.

The rest of these are specific tips to help you learn on the job. Please feel free to use or disregard some or all of the following tips:

- 1. If you have a patient with a diagnosis you need to learn more about you can find a review article for a broad overview or narrow the focus to a more specific area.**
 - For example don't try to read about “migraine”. Narrow the focus to one area for a 5-10 min focused reading time (ex: treatment of migraine). You may be able to find an article that hits all aspects of the topic and isn't 15 pages, but that may be difficult.
 - American Family Physician (AFP) does a great job with succinctly presenting reviews on family medicine topics. Often you can even find an article that focuses on one aspect of the disease (diagnosis or treatment).
- 2. Practice forming focused clinical questions.**
 - This will help you avoid getting distracted by reading about interesting things you find during your search that don't pertain to your patient. Examples: Which rheumatoid arthritis medications are safe to continue perioperatively? Which patients with COPD exacerbation require antibiotics? What antibiotics can be used for COPD exacerbation?
- 3. Read before you go see a new patient.**
 - If you get a call from the ER about a patient coming in with a COPD exacerbation set a timer on your phone and take 5-10 minutes to read about the diagnosis (history, exam, labs, imaging, or **differential diagnosis**) to help guide your questioning of the patient.
- 4. Practice using resources and ask others what they use.**
 - It is more important for you to learn a good method for finding answers to clinical questions than to know everything there is to know! This may seem odd, but in 5 years many things we

do WILL change and you need to know where to find information more than memorizing the current way of doing things.

5. **Use your attending and team leader to help you learn.**

-Ask questions! This seems obvious, but sometimes fear of exposing that you don't know something about one of your patients can stop you from asking. This is a safe environment for questions!! Even if your attending asks you to look it up, feel free to ask them what resource they recommend for that particular question to help guide you. Also let them know if you have tried and been unable to find the answer so they can help you.

6. **Ask an attending or team leader to talk about a topic or refer you to an article they recommend on the topic.**

-This goes along with #5. You can only read or look up so many questions per day before getting fatigued. Feel free to ask those around you if they'd be willing to talk about a topic either that day or the next or find you a brief article.

7. **Never spend more than 10 minutes trying to find an answer to a focused clinical question.**

-See #6. The average doc spends 59 seconds looking for the answer to a clinical question before resorting to "what feels good". Work at developing this skill! Ask for help if you don't find your answer after 10 min. Let them know where you searched and what terms you used (or ask them theirs) so that you learn more about efficient lit searches. It's okay to spend longer than this reading, but don't waste time trying to find the answer if others are available to help you.

8. **Figure out a way to reinforce the learning you get on the job.**

-You will be learning on the job, but not realizing it (teaching on rounds, noon conferences, morning teaching, asking your team leader things, etc). All people learn with multiple reiterations of material over time. Pick a way that helps you solidify the things you learn (ex: think about the application to your patient, take notes in a place you can review later such as evernote or other folders, email yourself a one-line summary of the teaching point).

-A great teacher once recommended writing 1-2 brief things learned on a post-it each day. If you did that daily you would have 25-50 things learned in the course of ONE month better than if you did nothing. If you review your post-its at the end of each week then again at the end of the month you have cemented the learning by having thought about that particular fact 4 times instead of 1!