

Medical Student Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Background

From the utilization of resources to the education of medical students, the 2019 Coronavirus pandemic is an unprecedented disruption of the healthcare system that has led to the development of new guidelines, recommendations, and governmental regulations across the healthcare system. With the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) requiring the removal of medical students from clinical clerkship, alternatives to the traditional medical learning environment are actively being sought which presents a unique challenge to education.

Pre-Clerkship

As social distancing has proven to be the most effective preventative strategy for the eradication of the Coronavirus, medical schools across the world are doing their part to “flatten the curve” by restricting the exposure of medical students. With the relatively recent implementation of online virtual environments, pre-clerkship medical education has shifted even more from the traditional classroom environment with small-group learning sessions and anatomy labs to remote learning via videotaped lectures, virtual meeting, and remote testing.

Examinations

Medical students hoping to one day practice within the United States are required to pass numerous examinations in order to graduate and ultimately obtain their medical licensure. Testing centers who administer the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) and Comprehensive Osteopathic Medical Licensing Examination (COMLEX) announced closure of their testing centers for the foreseeable future. Clearly, COVID19 has impacted medical students in a variety of ways, altering numerous graduation deadlines and even delaying the prospect of obtaining residency positions^{3,4}.

Core Clerkships and Electives

The *Association of American Medical Colleges* and the *Liaison Committee on Medical Education (LCME)* are governing bodies within the United States medical education system and initially released national guidelines “strongly supporting” the suspension of medical student clinical rotations until at least March 31st, 2020. This suspension was said to “allow for the development of educational strategies and alternative clinical experiences” as well as helping to limit the overuse of personal protective equipment in an already strained healthcare system^{1,2}.

On March 30th, the AAMC published updated guidelines stating “unless there is a critical health care workforce need locally, we strongly suggest that medical students not be involved in any direct patient care activities for the next two weeks, through April 14th, 2020”¹.

The challenge with remote medical education is while online-based learning is a proven method, the lack of in-person clinical experience in the later years of medical school may result in students missing physician-patient interactions. As a result, medical schools are encouraging students to participate in telemedicine interactions between physicians and their patients. This modality, combined with the supplemental videos, virtual learning platforms, and leniency in educational timelines, have emerged in many medical institutions around the world as the most common methods to optimize both a medical student’s time and tuition.

References

- 1) Important guidance for medical students on clinical rotations during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. Press release. Association of American Medical Colleges. Published March 17, 2020. Accessed April 5th, 2020. <https://www.aamc.org/news-insights/press-releases/important-guidance-medical-students-clinical-rotations-during-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>
- 2) COVID-19 updates and resources. Liaison Committee on Medical Education. Updated March 25, 2020. Accessed April 5th, 2020. <https://lcme.org/covid-19/>
- 3) “Prometric Test Center Closures.” *Prometric*, www.prometric.com/closures.
- 4) “Announcements.” *United States Medical Licensing Examination*, www.usmle.org/announcements/?ContentId=267.