

COVID-19: An ongoing challenge for medical education

Guilherme Movio, 3rd Year Medical Student

Medical education is one of the many elements that the on-going coronavirus pandemic has continued to affect. As a third-year student, formal teaching resumed at the end of August 2020. Lancaster Medical School was scheduled to move into the new Health Innovation Campus (HIC) in March – so we were all excited about the new building. It's a spacious and modern environment that will provide Lancaster Medics with world-class facilities. For the first few weeks, all teaching was continued online; some exceptions were made as we had vital training to attend, including venepuncture and catheterisation. There has been great effort from Lancaster Medical School (LMS) to keep us informed about the ever-changing situation.

We were informed that we would be bubbled to avoid excessive exposure to different households. My house was placed in general practice (GP) for our first rotation. Our GP practice handed us a very detailed timetable and we were grateful for the communication, which is something I have heard other students have struggled with. With the situation, there have been difficulties enrolling medical students back into placements across the country, as there is hesitancy around students carrying the virus between the university and hospitals. The practice we are placed at has tried to involve us as much as possible, allowing us to lead consultations by telephone. This has been an odd experience, because we are taught so heavily about the importance of non-verbal communication and establishing good patient rapport, which is strange and difficult by telephone. I believe this will be the “norm” for the time being, so it's important we pick up these skills. Unfortunately, clinical experiences in specific specialties will be difficult to gain, including Ears Nose and Throat (ENT), Ophthalmology, and Dermatology. It's challenging to fit students into face-to-face clinics and at the same time adhere to safe social distancing. Students normally have rotations in clinics in these specialties, but for the time being this isn't happening. We hope these will be re-arranged; as such experiences are vital for competent and confident approaches to conditions we will encounter during our subsequent training.

Anxiety within the medical student body has been consistent throughout the process of returning to education and placements. Many students have had to make sacrifices to continue their medical education. Jacob McSweeney, 3rd year medical student at LMS, who has vulnerable family members at home commented: *“Due to my mother suffering from a life-limiting illness, the return to university has never been easy. Social distancing restrictions have made trips home less frequent, making a tough move even more challenging. Time with my family is precious, I find it difficult to be away from them and COVID-19 has only added to these anxieties. Continuing with my studies this year also requires me to return to hospital placements, making any return home a potential risk to my mother's health due to the intensity of her immunosuppressive treatment.”* Final year medical students were also harshly affected, as final examinations were postponed and electives cancelled. Amy Breslin, 5th year medical student vented: *“Extensive clinical experience before final examinations is essential, medical students across the country will suffer the consequences of being away from clinical practice for so long when sitting examinations”.* Amy added



Jacob McSweeney (left) and Guilherme Movio (right) in our new scrubs for hospital placement. (Not adhering to social distancing, as we house-share).

that throughout lockdown, it was a struggle to hold a full-time job to financially support herself whilst simultaneously revising essential content for final examinations. Despite the anxieties, we are all very glad to be back. We appreciate the difficulties faced by universities and the pressures within hospital.

The social element within the university has also changed. Students are now confined to socialising mostly within their households, due to lockdown restrictions. This is difficult for students, particularly in their first year of studies, who have had to relocate and adapt to their new homes. Medical students especially rely on the ability to have social lives outside of their work. Due to the demanding nature of the medical degree and difficult situations often dealt with on placement, we depend on our friends and family for down time. Emphasis on student mental health should be particularly focused on at this time, as many will be feeling the troubles of social isolation.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 is likely to linger around for some time which means that adjustments are going to have to continue for the forthcoming future. I am proud of the medical education community coming together to support medical students. Many doctors around the country have organised teaching sessions online and mentoring schemes which have continued to engage students throughout lockdown. The university has been exceptionally understanding about our feedback and have done everything in their power to allow a smooth transition back into education and as a keen student, I can only be grateful.

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