

## Exams May be Cancelled, but Humanity is Not:

### A Medical Student Perspective on the COVID-19 Pandemic

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“Stay at home!” Public health pleas to help “flatten the curve” amidst the COVID-19 pandemic have led to a wave of societal disruptions. Social distancing, defined as keeping yourself at least six feet away from others and avoiding gatherings of ten or more people, has become the new norm for Americans over the past three weeks. These (among other) dramatic societal changes and growing pressure on our nation’s hospital systems have had a distinct impact on medical education, particularly when it comes to clinical training.

As third year medical students, our professional development has heavily relied on in-person clinical experiences, directly interacting with patients and healthcare providers. However, with the national push for a 14-day quarantine, students across the country were pulled from their clinical settings until further notice.<sup>1,2</sup> In a vast departure from our normally structured path to residency, licensing examinations were also temporarily suspended and our professional lives were placed on hold.<sup>3</sup> Medical education institutions across the country have faced the challenge of inventing new ways of supporting student learning in these critical years of clinical training. In many medical schools, this has led to the roll-out of new *virtual* clinical experiences and greater utilization of dynamic, online training modalities. Students at the University of Illinois, for example, are observing procedures through video conferencing and utilizing mock scenarios to prepare for future patient encounters.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, on the East Coast at the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine, students log-in to live virtual journal clubs, lectures and morning reports. These “online clerkships” support students’ continued professional development and progression through educational requirements.

In an informal survey of medical students across the country, there was a resounding concern for what the sweeping societal changes would mean for our residency preparations and our clinical training overall. Simultaneous with online learning, medical students have taken ownership over their residency preparedness, utilizing their additional time to work on personal statements, curriculum vitae, and study for licensing examinations. Students also expressed concern for their mental health in these uncertain times, finding relief in connecting with family and friends and catching up on much needed self-care. Whether revisiting lost culinary skills, reading a new book, or even going for a run, many have found this time at home to be grounding and introspective. As medical students, we are constantly engrossed in our education and learning the details needed for each progressive step in our training. This new time out of the hospital has allowed us to take a step back and in light of our nation’s COVID-19 response, see the system as a whole from a new perspective. At the same time, we have not lost sight of our colleagues and mentors on the frontlines in this pandemic. In fact, students across all healthcare professions have voiced an earnest desire to do our part in the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>5</sup>

Through the power of social media, communities across the Mid-Atlantic have seen an outpouring of volunteerism, donations and camaraderie amongst students across the healthcare spectrum. Through Facebook groups such as the “Philadelphia Organization of Health Professions Students - COVID Response,”<sup>6</sup> nearly 2,000 students in nursing, medicine, dental

medicine, podiatry, veterinary medicine and physician assistant programs have come together for a united goal of stepping off the sidelines. This group has allowed students to collaborate, allocate resources, spread awareness and collect much needed personal protective equipment from the community. From blood drives, to child and pet care for healthcare workers, to meals for our region's most vulnerable populations, this group continues to develop innovative ways of supporting our mentors, colleagues and patients from our new positions at home. Through this enthusiasm for public service, our Mid-Atlantic medical and allied health professions students have found a way to continue making a difference, while forging new inter-professional cross-collaborations.

As our nation learns some hard and invaluable lessons in the spread and management of infectious diseases, emergency preparedness, and population health, we too have found this period to be transformative. The COVID-19 pandemic has shed new light on our individual roles as future physicians in the greater community at large. Students have expressed a greater appreciation for the physician's role in population health, citing the importance of elevating public awareness, preventing the spread of infectious diseases and having resources on hand to effectively treat large numbers of critically ill patients. As future physicians, we are witnessing humanity at one of its most vulnerable times, not only for our nation, but across the world. In this transformative period, "stay at home" has thus become more than a blanket directive to self-isolate. To us, it represents a civic responsibility to protect one another from unnecessary exposures and a movement to individually and collectively do our part in this COVID-19 pandemic.

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