

A SHIFT IN PERSPECTIVE: MEDICAL STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

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2020 began as a year of fresh starts - a new decade promised boundless opportunities and endless avenues to explore. Optimism rang from social media platforms, deeming this as the year to forget your past, take control of your life and foster change. Then, a virus changed it all.

As the first conversations of coronavirus spread to the US, suspicion remained low and life continued as normal. My first moment of fear came, as did many others, from a Netflix documentary entitled *Pandemic* that discussed the previous influenza pandemic of 1918. As if overnight, words such as 'social distancing,' 'flattening the curve' and 'COVID-19' emerged, and the optimism that 2020 had adopted disappeared as quickly as the virus fell on our country.

In our third and fourth years as medical students, we are spread all across the city of Louisville in various clinical settings. Learning is done through hands-on experience as we translate our textbook knowledge into clinical practice. Often, we are the front line to patients; we gather their history, presentation of illness and do a physical exam before reporting back to our teaching physicians. Each day presents interesting cases that allow us to connect ailments to humans and to understand the gravity of our role as physicians. Through these two short years of medical school, we learn how to start providing patient-centered care, and we grow immensely from these very first patients that we treat. Knowledge becomes applicable and practical, and we want to study for our patients, not simply for a grade.

Fast forward to March 17, and I can remember exactly where I sat, in the middle of my psychiatry rotation, while our administrators

explained that we were no longer allowed at our clinical sites. We were expected to leave immediately with no return date in sight. Suddenly, the hands-on learning that had been promised since the beginning of our time as medical students was pulled out from under us. The medical education process that we were always told to trust in was halted with one announcement. For the first time in our training, external factors were going to keep us from the very place where we were learning and growing.

Helpless would be the word that most of us would use to describe our time in quarantine. As future physicians who had vowed to serve others in our daily lives, most of us wanted to assist on the front lines - but we did not have the choice or training to do so. We had to stay inside, like everyone else, and revert to learning from computers and textbooks. Patients themselves were no longer able to help us understand the pathology of their diseases and we were forced behind a screen to try to simulate a similar learning environment. The hands-on experiences that we had sought, that we had tried so hard for, were missing in action - boom. Our understanding of medicine suffered without associating a real person to each problem.

While fear grew and uncertainty took over all of us, anxiety flooded through our medical school class. Would we be able to finish our mandatory clinicals? Would we have time to get things together and take our board exams, to become residents next June? When would it be safe for medical students to return? As the virus spread, feelings shifted more from personal fears to global concerns. With my brother as an ICU nurse in the COVID-19 unit at Norton, would he be safe and receive adequate personal protective equipment? We feared for everyone's safety. COVID-19 held all our lives in its grip.

June 1, 2020 arrived finally, the day that medical students re-

turned to the clinical setting. Things were nowhere near the same. At our clinical sites, we must take our temperature every morning, wear masks all day, remain distanced from our peers and shower ASAP after hospital work. No student can provide in-person care for patients with any respiratory symptoms or fever. Outside of these rules, our roles remained the same: we still talked to patients and learned from each encounter.

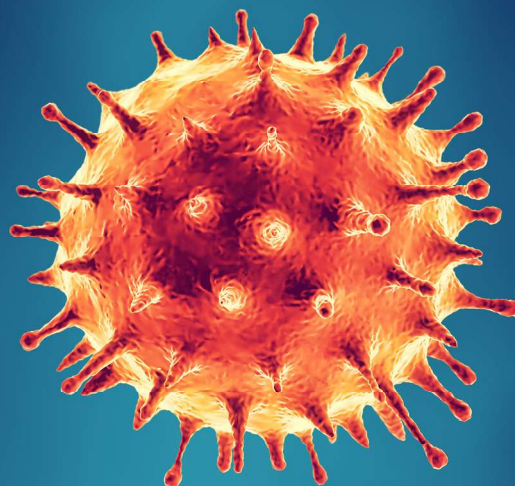
As a young medical student, the initial way I hope to gain respect from an older patient is through a strong introduction and firm handshake. This has been replaced with a gentle wave. Before, I would sit close to my patients, calm, smiling to begin, to help them feel comfortable discussing their health. Now, I am distanced and my facial expressions are masked. We are taught that our hands are the best tool we have for physical exams - yet now I feel there is hesitancy to use them. Even when I am able to examine a patient, it is through the artificial touch of latex gloves. Such simple communication had established much more than I ever realized, symbolizing trust between physician and patient. Now we have to learn a new way.

Talking with my patients these last few weeks, we have decided that fear and uncertainty still reign. People are struggling. Worries about life, work, health and the future are at levels that patients have never personally seen. Their usual workout, their routines and daily activities are gone or changed. They are adapting as best they can. Consistently, they have gained weight, they are eating worse foods and more frequently while at home all day. Alcohol consumption has gone up as people try to fill their time and cope with their new lives now. Physicians are giving patients grace and encouragement, but COVID-19 is affecting humanity in all aspects of health – it may take years to resolve its repercussions.

Now that we are halfway through 2020, a year that began with so much optimism, I believe that we have a choice as to how we move forward. As physicians and medical students, we must find ways to connect with our patients and gain trust beyond the masks. We must now more than ever support our patients with their mental health as much as their physical health through interventions such as mindfulness techniques, therapists, medications and the utilization of social workers. Sitting with patients, listening to them as we do, is helpful in itself. As medical professionals, we must look beyond propaganda and stay educated on evidence-based medicine. As citizens, we must set an example to others of the importance of remaining socially distanced, wearing masks in public and refraining from high risk activities. Though fear and uncertainty inevitably remain, it is vital that hope still prevail – for breakthrough treatments, an effective vaccine and the time when all can safely return to society. 🌸

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glms.org/covid-19-resources/