STUDENT

BMJ STUDENT

Covid-19: how to use your time when clinical placements are postponed

John A Henry *fifth year medical student*¹, Susannah Black *fifth year medical student*¹, Matthew Gowell *fifth year medical student*¹, Elizabeth Morris², general practitioner

¹Medical Sciences Division, University of Oxford, UK; ²Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences, University of Oxford, UK

Most UK medical schools have postponed clinical teaching because of the covid-19 pandemic, leaving students, who would usually be busy with exam preparations and clinical commitments, with time off. Some students might find a long period of unstructured study daunting. In this article, we share our thoughts and experiences on how you might use this time positively by continuing learning and professional development and helping the national efforts in dealing with covid-19 ([box 1](#)).

Box 1: Tips for using time positively during the covid-19 pandemic

Exam preparation

- Revise anatomy by referring to radiology resources
- Improve learning strategies and prepare educational resources

Preparing for practice

- Develop prescribing abilities
- Learn about how technology is changing medical consultations
- Learn about pandemics

Career development

- Get involved in research
- Develop teaching abilities
- Develop an area of interest

Look out for others

- Offer to help those affected in your local community

Look after yourself

- Invest time in your mental health

Exam preparation

Improve your learning strategies and prepare educational resources

Medicine involves lifelong learning, so find effective study strategies that work for you. With the pressures of upcoming exams and a seemingly endless amount to learn, it is tempting to rote learn topics, but this will give you only a superficial grasp of them.¹ Use this time to develop more effective learning strategies that support long term knowledge retention. Strategies might include:

- Using concept maps to make connections within and between topics—for example, different causes and types of seizure and how they relate to each other²
- Making notes on topics in your own words rather than copying out sections of a textbook
- Using examples to describe abstract concepts—for example, using conditions to illustrate different types of genetic inheritance.

Following your medical school's curriculum will ensure you cover the right topics.

You can commit information to memory through repeated self-testing; active recall (for example, listing side effects of antiepileptic drugs without resorting to notes); and spaced repetition (for example, asking yourself the same question again after longer time intervals).³ Digital flashcards (for example, Anki⁴) and online question banks, such as Passmedicine,⁵ are study tools that can help you to combine these principles.⁶

Revise anatomy using radiology resources

During a busy clinical rotation, anatomy can get overlooked. Studying anatomy using radiology image banks is a useful way to learn the imaging seen in practice. Websites and ebooks are good places to start. They can be easily accessed from home—for example, radiopaedia.org,

radiologymasterclass.co.uk, linestubes.com, and Grainger and Allison's *Diagnostic Radiology*.⁷⁻¹⁰

Preparing for practice

Develop prescribing abilities

The idea of prescribing drugs as a newly qualified doctor is often a source of anxiety for students,¹¹ and prescribing errors among junior doctors are common.¹² Familiarise yourself with common sources of prescribing information, such as the *British National Formulary*, and create a list of drugs that you will commonly use as a junior doctor. The World Health Organization recommends that clinicians keep a “p drug” list of personal drugs they often prescribe so that they become familiar with the indications, contraindications, and common side effects.¹³

Learn about how technology is changing medical consultations

The use of digital communication, such as video consultations and e-consulting, as an alternative to face-to-face consultation¹⁴ has been accelerated by the current pandemic.¹⁵ Many of the innovations made to facilitate e-consultations will remain in the future. You could use this time to further explore and understand the uses of technology in medical consultations.

Learn about pandemics

Pandemics rarely feature in undergraduate medical education. Despite this, we are likely to face emerging infectious diseases in our future clinical practice as their incidence increases globally.^{16 17} The current covid-19 pandemic should prompt us to learn more about these diseases, including areas such as disease modelling and public health policy. Free online learning resources such as the FutureLearn course on “plagues, pestilence, and pandemics” take learners through a structured programme.¹⁸ Many medical journals have made content on covid-19 free to access through dedicated web pages, including reflective and opinion pieces as well as research. Why not set up a virtual journal club with other students where you can discuss the latest papers and how to interpret the emerging evidence?

Career development

Get involved in research

Although the middle of a pandemic might seem a strange time to suggest getting involved in research, the value of evidence based research to inform clinical and governmental decision making has never been clearer. Skills developed during research activities, ranging from collecting and assimilating data to collaborating and communicating with others, can be directly useful in your clinical practice.¹⁹ Systematic or narrative reviews are a great introduction to research, and with many centres working on rapid reviews,²⁰ there might be local opportunities to get involved.

A case report is a good chance to expand on an interesting patient you saw on the wards or a case presentation you were asked to give. *The BMJ* Case Reports editors have published advice on how to get started.²¹

Develop teaching abilities

All doctors are expected to contribute to the teaching of their colleagues and of medical students. Near peer teaching²² of

fellow students can prepare you for this role, allowing you to develop teaching skills while also supporting clinical faculty.²³ Students also benefit from having a role model who offers well targeted knowledge.²⁴ Consider developing teaching sessions and delivering them remotely to your peers or younger students. Make sure you include feedback forms to document your progress and commitment to teaching. Your medical school or MedSoc might be looking for students to support more junior peers with teaching while lectures and placements are on hold. Online tutoring can refine your teaching skills and provide a source of income, while helping students and parents who might be worried about continued learning during school closures.

Develop an area of interest

Think about which specialty you would like to pursue. The royal colleges of physicians, surgeons, and general practitioners have published advice on this, as has the British Medical Association.²⁵⁻²⁸ You can explore reflective pieces from doctors about their experiences in different jobs—and consider how these fit with your own values, experiences, and future goals. The book *So You Want to Be A Brain Surgeon?* offers detailed and entertaining insights into different disciplines.²⁹ If you have narrowed down your areas of interest, seek out recent developments in those specialties using primers, opinion pieces, and reviews. These will keep you up to date and might inspire you to enter essay writing competitions. Prize winning essays improve your CV and score you points in future applications for specialty training.³⁰

Looking after others and yourself

Offer to help those affected in your local community

Many medical students have stepped forward to help during the pandemic—perhaps most notably the early graduation of final year students and their deployment to wards.³¹ Besides volunteering in hospitals, medical students can also contribute to the efforts against this disease. People without close support networks might struggle with shopping and with childcare over the coming months. With reduced social contact, many older and vulnerable people might be at risk of isolation and depression.^{32 33} Community support groups are being created nationwide; so join these efforts to help those in your local community where possible. Helping can be as simple as offering to call isolated people, doing shopping, offering childcare support, or even offering to care for the pets of NHS staff.³⁴

Invest time in looking after your mental health

Medical students face many challenges, and this is even more true in the current climate, with additional difficulties presented by social distancing measures and risk to loved ones. Take some time to look after yourself. Be realistic and manage your expectations of what can be achieved. Develop strategies to help cope with those negative thoughts, nagging worries, and things that are outside your control. These strategies will be invaluable in your future career. **Box 2** lists resources for looking after your mental health during the covid-19 pandemic.

Box 2: Mental health resources

- Mind <https://www.mind.org.uk/coronavirus-we-are-here-for-you/>
- World Health Organization <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/coping-with-stress.pdf>
- Mental Health Foundation <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/looking-after-your-mental-health-during-coronavirus-outbreak>
- Centers for Disease Control <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html>

EM is funded by a Wellcome Trust fellowship. The views expressed are those of the authors and not those of the university or the Department of Health and Social Care

Competing interests: None.

Provenance and peer review: Encouraged from a pitch; not externally peer reviewed.

Links to other BMJ/Student BMJ articles: None.

- 1 Tait H, Entwistle N. Identifying students at risk through ineffective study strategies. *High Educ* 1996;31:97-116.
- 2 Richmond A, Cranfield T, Cooper N. Study tips for medical students. *BMJ* 2019;365:k663.
- 3 Augustin M. How to learn effectively in medical school: Test yourself, learn actively, and repeat in intervals. *Yale J Biol Med* 2014;87:207-12.
- 4 Anki - powerful, intelligent flashcards. <https://apps.ankiweb.net/>
- 5 Passmedicine. <https://passmedicine.com/>
- 6 Larsen DP, Butler AC, Roediger HL. Repeated testing improves long-term retention relative to repeated study: A randomised controlled trial. *Med Educ* 2009;43:1174-81.
- 7 Radiopaedia.org. the wiki-based collaborative radiology resource. <https://radiopaedia.org/>
- 8 Radiology Masterclass. <https://www.radiologymasterclass.co.uk/>
- 9 LinesTubes.com. Chest x ray lines, tubes, and devices. <http://linestubes.com/>
- 10 Adam A, Dixon AK, Gillard JH, Schaefer-Prokop C, Allison DJ. *Grainger and Allison's diagnostic radiology: a textbook of medical imaging*. 6th ed. Churchill Livingstone, 2014.
- 11 Coombes ID, Mitchell CA, Stowasser DA. Safe medication practice: Attitudes of medical students about to begin their intern year. *Med Educ* 2008;42:427-31.
- 12 Dornan T, Ashcroft D, Heathfield H, et al. An in depth investigation into causes of prescribing errors by foundation trainees in relation to their medical education. EQUIP study. Manchester; 2009.
- 13 de Vries T, Henning R, Hogerzil H. *Action DF-A practical manual*. World Health Organization, Guide to good prescribing. 1994

- 14 Government HM. *Personalised health and care 2020 using data and technology to transform outcomes for patients and citizens: a framework for action*. 2020.
- 15 Greenhalgh T, Wherton J, Shaw S, Morrison C. Video consultations for covid-19. *BMJ* 2020;368:m998.
- 16 Ross AGP, Crowe SM, Tyndall MW, Petersen E. Planning for the Next Global Pandemic. *Int J Infect Dis* 2005;38:89-94.
- 17 Jones KE, Patel NG, Levy MA, et al. Global trends in emerging infectious diseases. *Nature* 2008;451:990-3.
- 18 FutureLearn. Plagues, pestilence and pandemics: are you ready? <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/plague-pestilence-pandemic>
- 19 Brancati FL, Mead LA, Levine DM, Martin D, Margolis S, Klag MJ. Early predictors of career achievement in academic medicine. *JAMA* 1992;267:1372-6.
- 20 Tricco AC, Antony J, Zarin W, et al. A scoping review of rapid review methods. *BMC Med* 2015;13:224. <http://bmcmmedicine.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12916-015-0465-6>.
- 21 Biswas S, Jones O. How to write a medical case report. *BMJ* 2016;355:h3731.
- 22 Sonagara VJ, Santhirakumaran S, Kalkat HS. The value of near-peer teaching in the medical curriculum. *Adv Med Educ Pract* 2018;9:63-4.
- 23 Ten Cate O, Durning S. Peer teaching in medical education: twelve reasons to move from theory to practice. *Med Teach* 2007;29:591-9. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01421590701606799>.
- 24 Lockspeiser TM, O'Sullivan P, Teherani A, Muller J. Understanding the experience of being taught by peers: The value of social and cognitive congruence. *Adv Health Sci Educ Theory Pract* 2008;13:361-72.
- 25 Royal College of Physicians. How to choose your medical specialty. 2020. www.rcplondon.ac.uk/education-practice/advice/how-choose-your-medical-specialty.
- 26 Royal College of Surgeons. Surgical specialties. 2020. <https://www.rcseng.ac.uk/careers-in-surgery/trainees/foundation-and-core-trainees/surgical-specialties/>
- 27 Royal College of General Practitioners. Discover general practice. <https://www.rcgp.org.uk/training-exams/discover-general-practice.aspx>.
- 28 British Medical Association. Employment and career advice. 2020. <https://www.bma.org.uk/advice>
- 29 Ward C, Eccles S. So you want to be a brain surgeon? 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2001. 242 p.
- 30 Royal Society of Medicine. Prizes for students. 2020. Available from: <https://www.rsm.ac.uk/prizes-and-awards/prizes-for-students/>
- 31 Harvey A. Covid-19: medical schools given powers to graduate final year students early to help NHS. *BMJ* 2020;368:m1227.
- 32 Wang J, Mann F, Lloyd-Evans B, Ma R, Johnson S. Associations between loneliness and perceived social support and outcomes of mental health problems: A systematic review. *BMC Psychiatry* 2018;18:156.
- 33 Singh A, Misra N. Loneliness, depression and sociability in old age. *Ind Psychiatry J* 2009;18:51.
- 34 National Health Supporters. National Health Supporters. 2020. <https://www.nationalhealthsupporters.co.uk/>

Published by the BMJ Publishing Group Limited. For permission to use (where not already granted under a licence) please go to <http://group.bmj.com/group/rights-licensing/permissions>