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BMJ STUDENT

Covid-19: the medical students responding to the pandemic

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The covid-19 pandemic has resulted in the cancellation of thousands of hours of clinical placements, suspension of teaching in person, and the postponement of most exams. This has left medical students with an unusual amount of free time but a strong desire to be part of the response to the crisis. Although final year students have newly graduated and are expected to or already have started structured roles within the national health service imminently, those who are less senior are finding other ways to volunteer their time and skills.

The Medical Schools Council guidance for medical students volunteering to help with the covid-19 response emphasises that they must prioritise their studies,[1] but this hasn't stopped student groups from across the United Kingdom turning their minds and hands to supporting the UK's covid-19 response. As Penelope Sucharitkul, a third year medical student at the University of Leeds wrote in a recent article published by BMJ Opinion, "It may be before my time, but we will eventually be the surgeons, GPs, and emergency doctors of the future. I can't stand by and let this pandemic blow over without lifting a finger."[2]

In this article we showcase some of the medical students who are using their skills to tackle problems caused by covid-19. These students are involved in various initiatives across the United Kingdom.

Key worker support networks

The HealthSHIP—Health Students Helping in Pandemics platform,[3] founded by ScotGEM (Scottish graduate entry medicine) medical students Cassandra Baiano and Ronald MacDonald, began with a tweet suggesting that students offer key workers help with childcare. The tweet received more than 2500 likes and sparked the idea for a nationwide network, which now involves hundreds of medical students and healthcare workers from London to Dundee. Through a fully functioning automated platform, students are matched with those who need their help. Baiano and her team of volunteers hope the HealthSHIP platform will facilitate a unified, sustainable, and agile response for medical students to support frontline staff.

Other networks have mobilised more locally through Facebook groups, labelled "National Health Supporters" or "Helping Hands" groups. Alice Kennedy, a fourth year medical student at the University of Birmingham who leads the Birmingham Helping Hands group, said: "One student volunteered to collect and deliver a bed to a family, which meant a family member was able to be discharged home. Others have supported a local general practice in delivering medicines to older and vulnerable patients." Numerous other students have helped out with childcare and other tasks.

Students have also joined forces with organisations that distribute equipment. MedSupplyDriveUK[4] has welcomed student volunteers to help coordinate the redistribution of personal protective equipment from non-healthcare settings.

Returning to the NHS

Some medical students have chosen to help in the NHS by returning to former professions or taking on new clinical roles.

Sam Maxwell, a third year medical student at Leeds, has returned to the team in the emergency department, where she has worked as a healthcare assistant since beginning medical school in 2017. Stepping into what has been weeks of preparation for the Emergency Department Maxwell said: "You can always help, but you must be prepared to do whatever is needed—it's not a glamourous job and it's hard work. This is nothing like placement."

Students who usually volunteer as community first responders (CFRs) with ambulance trusts have stepped into new roles in the emergency services. Lucy Pangbourne, a third year medical student at the University of Leeds, has volunteered to work as a dispatch assistant in the emergency operations centre for the Yorkshire Ambulance Service (YAS). "With placements cancelled and usual CFR activities limited, I was keen to utilise my skills elsewhere," Pangbourne said. "I assist the team with resource allocation, communicating with crews, and liaising with other emergency services. It's really busy but I'm enjoying being involved with more of the 'behind the scenes' work of YAS."

Others have started new roles, such as Tabitha Ashley-Norman, a third year medical student also at the University of Leeds, who has returned home to London and joined the NHS 111 team. "I'm helping to triage incoming calls to take the pressure off the 999 and ambulance services. It's been an invaluable experience so far," she said.

Social media advocacy

Other groups have used social media to connect medical students from different areas who can share information and provide peer support. The team members at Becoming a Doctor, a voluntary organisation that until recently ran events for secondary school students interested in a career in medicine, are using their existing social media presence to host Twitter chats for medical students. By collaborating with organisations such as the General Medical Council, students were able through

their initial Twitter chats to have their questions answered and to showcase their covid-19 related projects using #MedStudentCovid.

Daniel Huddart, a final year medical student at Imperial College and part of the Becoming a Doctor team, said: "We felt that there was lots of varying information out there about what was going to happen to different groups of medical students. By linking up medical students and relevant organisations on an informal platform like social media, students could voice their concerns and worries and see what information others had been given."

"A lot of people actually made a Twitter account to join this chat, and are still using it—it's brought a lot of people together," added Biyyam Meghna Rao, a fourth year medical student at the University of Liverpool, who was also involved in planning the Twitter event.

Research and innovation

Other students have been turning their hand to medical research and innovation to create novel solutions for problems faced by both clinicians and the public.

MedTech Foundation, a national engagement initiative for students, early stage researchers, and clinicians was set up in 2015 to support and promote healthcare technology innovation. Supported by the National Institute for Health Research Surgical In Vitro Diagnostics Co-operative, MedTech Foundation now has branches in Leeds, Birmingham, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Leicester, and Warwick, and it facilitate internships alongside its annual innovation programme.

The organisation has launched a covid-19 response team, bringing together more than 125 students, clinicians, scientists, and engineers from across the United Kingdom. Part of this team's work has been hosting a virtual "hackathon," where multidisciplinary teams worked on solutions for some of the most pressing issues faced by those tackling the covid-19 pandemic. The most promising solutions will be presented to companies, which can then see them through to materialisation.

As with other projects during the covid-19 pandemic, the Hackathon was mobilised in a matter of days. "The hackathon had responses ranging from medical student to consultant surgeons, as well as engineering students and early career researchers. We had 18 teams working on clinical unmet needs submitted by clinicians and had a really productive 48 hour period," said Shu Ng, a fourth year medical student at the **[University of Leeds]** and member of the national committee for the covid-19 innovation response team at MedTech Foundation.

Tackling covid-19 health inequality

Luamar Dolfini and Samar Babiker, penultimate year students at St George's University of London, have used their language skills to create infographics in a variety of languages, thus enabling people from minority ethnic communities to access simple, reliable guidance in their first language.

"We've both always had an interest in health inequalities," said Dolfini, "and this is a time where, more than ever, there is work needed to bridge the divide between certain minority ethnic communities and the NHS." She added that with covid-19 guidance changing so rapidly, many people are using social media to access up-to-date health information.

The infographics were collated from reputable sources and checked by senior clinicians before being translated into languages such as Arabic, Portuguese, Bangla, and Spanish, and more are to follow. "We're using the main social media platforms to distribute the information, mostly through those who are already embedded into local communities," said Dolfini.

"We felt that we have a responsibility to be ambassadors for health, for our respective communities, and other communities who experience similar challenges," added Babiker.

Returning to study

Although the Medical Schools Council guidance emphasises the importance of students, particularly those in the later years of their course, returning to clinical placement as soon as is feasible.[5] A level of disruption to undergraduate medical courses should be anticipated throughout 2020, and likely beyond. What's clear, though, is that no amount of cancelled teaching, placement, or exams has deterred medical students from using their new found free time to contribute to the efforts to tackle covid-19, in a huge variety of ways.

1 Medical Schools Council. Statement of expectation: Medical Student volunteers in the NHS.2020. https://www.medschools.ac.uk/media/2622/statement-of-expectation-medical-student-volunteers-in-the-nhs.pdf.

2 Sucharitkul P. Covid-19: I'm torn between going home, and helping the NHS. 2020. https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2020/03/27/covid-19-im-torn-between-going-home-and-helping-the-nhs/.

3 Health Students Helping In Pandemics. https://healthship.org/login

4 MedSupplyDriveUK. https://www.medsupplydrive.org.uk/

5 Medical Schools Council. Statement on clinical placements. 2020. https://www.med-schools.ac.uk/media/2646/statement-on-clinical-placements.pdf.