Response to “Deploying Medical Students During the Covid-19 Pandemic”

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The Covid-19 pandemic has presented significant challenges to medical education. Amidst the initial wave, most medical schools replaced in-person lectures with online e-learning and remotely streamed lectures. As notably mentioned by the author, clinical experience is an irreplaceable aspect of medical school curriculum particularly for students nearing the end of their degree [1].

With each wave, the number of Covid-19 admissions rose drastically and NHS hospitals suffered. There were increasing concerns over limited resources and staffing shortages. To meet such demands necessitated the redeployment of healthcare professionals and doctors [2]. Stachteas et al. justifiably highlights how the deployment of medical students to support hospitals could solve this and provide invaluable medical training [1].

However, this does raise ethical dilemmas. Globally, it did not go unnoticed that medical students voluntarily engaged with initiatives to ease the healthcare systems during the pandemic [3]. Studies confirmed student involvement in voluntary services were led by public service and altruism. But where is the line to prevent students from being taken advantage of? The employment of voluntary medical students replaces the financial cost of paying healthcare workers for the same role. Thus, we feel students should be used as a last resort after other alternatives have been fully exhausted.

We support that medical students can provide assistance by carrying out tasks equivalent to their level of competence. Though, as raised by Imperial College School of Medicine

Students' Union, the argument against such an idea would be that medical students would be working to most likely cover shifts that are not as educationally fulfilling as the broad placement experiences and structured teaching that would have been previously arranged [4]. Medical education should remain at the forefront of student curriculums as this could jeopardise student learning.

The framework provided by Stachteas et al. for possible student involvement in assisting the pandemic is well thought out but does delegate a huge amount of responsibility to medical students. This could place a heavy burden on students to fulfil the requirements of a foundation year doctor's role and this can be exhaustive both mentally and physically for students.

Though we agree with the deployment of medical students in hospitals, we feel that adequate training and support should be arranged to encourage a safe working environment. We propose a scheme to regulate and maintain boundaries for medical students. This would protect students from overwork, especially given that the pandemic has already been a stressful period for students.

Declarations

Ethics Approval N/A.

Informed Consent N/A.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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