

Stuck in Limbo: Coping with an Unusual Circumstance as an International Medical Graduate from India

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The Experience

The world is on a war path. A war against a seemingly invincible disease that has driven humanity into a state of chaos and confusion. With over a hundred countries under some form of lockdown, people are striving to adjust to the new “normal” of social distancing and restricting themselves to the confines of their homes. In a country like India, a population of over 1.3 billion poses unique challenges. The lockdown in this country has been in place since the 24th of March. The once bustling streets are now empty. Only essential services remain open and there too strict social distancing norms are being adhered to. The government and police are working tirelessly to identify, trace and quarantine contacts. With over 60000 cases (as of 11th of May), these precautionary measures are all the more prudent now to prevent the occurrence of an unimaginable yet ever-looming threat: the overburdening of our healthcare system.

I am a young medical doctor from Bengaluru, India. I have been preparing for a medical residency in the United States. This is a process that involves years of time, money, effort and dedication. In the crux of my journey to achieve my dreams of training in the most advanced country in the world, my path has been brought to a staggering halt. I am now faced with a million uncertainties, a worry that's heightened by my idle mind. I'm anxious about the pandemic situation not just in India but in the United States as well. Watching the news, listening to the grim tales of death and despair has left me feeling distressed about the precariousness of the upcoming days.

This is true for thousands of aspirants like me across the globe. To be a competitive residency applicant, a lot of importance is placed on having a resume that is devoid of gaps or one that shows unproductive time periods. However, at present, electives are being called off, emails unanswered, flights cancelled and visa embassies closed indefinitely. Facebook groups are filled with posts of students worrying about the future. The panic is tangible. And contagious. With no end to this pandemic in sight, restrictions can extend even till the end of the year. What does that mean for International Medical Graduates?

Unfortunately, this cannot be answered at this time. I fight these questions of unsureness every day and have developed several strategies to spend my time constructively:

Volunteering

When the lockdown began, many junior doctors like me were asked to leave our jobs owing to insufficient funds and lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). To be young and able, and yet not given the opportunity to contribute to the healthcare system can be

frustrating. But if we look hard enough, opportunities show up in other forms. From volunteering as medical doctors to finding Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) involved in distributing food and basic amenities to vulnerable populations, there are ways to continue to help the society. Personally, I have been part of the Child Rights and You (CRY) Organization and have joined their efforts to compile online lessons for children from underprivileged communities.

Teleconsultation

We can join practices that are moving to teleconsultation and telehealth services. The discussion on incorporating these methods to meet the demands of the health care system began long before the present-day crisis.¹ Now through these online means, young doctors can continue to remain in touch with clinical practice and ease the burden off of senior professionals who work in the front lines. Contrary to my initial skepticism towards the practicality of teleconsultation, it has in fact been an eye opener because of its profound and far reaching impact. As part of a private organization I work with a team of primary care doctors to consult, treat and triage patients from remote parts of the country. We also mentor nurses (who form the backbone of the healthcare system in rural India) and guide their decisions in patient management.

Online learning

As medical schools around the world move to online classes, this can be a great use of technology for medical graduates as well.²⁻⁴ There are a wide variety of courses available at our fingertips. Many universities and organizations are even offering courses for free/nominal prices. We can look for online conferences, webinars and Continued Medical Education (CME) courses. This will help pick up some skills and gain more knowledge. As for me, I am using this time to brush up on my understanding of biostatistics (which, without a doubt, I would not have done under normal circumstances!)

Research

For individuals interested in research, this is the perfect time to join online research groups (or form one of our own) to begin online research projects, journal clubs etc.⁵ This becomes a platform to share information and knowledge, for beginners to get their foothold on research methodology or biostatistics and to develop critical thinking. Additionally, this gives us a chance to meet other young researchers and doctors to collaborate with on new studies. I am part of groups and organizations and am constantly on the lookout for mentors or research partners, new projects and inspirational ideas.

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In conclusion, these times are unprecedented and it can be difficult to add valuable experiences to our resume during a lockdown. These are some of the ways I have been keeping myself occupied. It is also important to remember that there are hundreds of people in similar situations of being stranded at life's crossroads and that we are not alone. While the world fights back this deadly disease, hope, optimism and support can drive those of us at home towards productivity and help stray away from fear and mindless panic.

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