

# To Help or Not to Help: A First Year Canadian Medical Student's Dilemma During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Janhavi Patel.1

# The Experience

On March 13, 2020, we received our first email concerning COVID-19. This was followed by a large flurry of emails and soon our inbox was flooded with, "there will no longer be any large group lectures"..."no clinical skills classes"... "all anatomy programs have been suspended" and so forth. The e-mails kept coming in, and with them came a wave of confusion about the future. For me, a first-year medical student, I was shocked. I understood that many universities across the globe were taking steps toward social distancing but an online medical school? That had to be a mistake. Suddenly, another email came in, suggesting that all the upper-year students on clerkship were discharged from clinical duties and that all medical students were expected to not visit any healthcare facilities unless necessary. After reading the last email, I was no longer feeling uncertain about the future; instead, I felt apprehensive. Although, I could not pinpoint the reason for my feelings.

Then my phone rang, it was my supervisor calling to check in. He asked what my thoughts were about medical students being suspended from clinical duties. Before I could say anything, he said that in this time when physicians should be helping out more, why should the medical students be discouraged from helping and doing their part? His idea was that we did not come to medicine to step away when the need arises, but to take proper precautions, and stand up in solidarity to provide care. Listening to him, I felt validated. I took a deep breath as I realized that the sentiment I felt was of being stripped of the opportunity to play my part. I kept thinking back to the day of our white coat ceremony just a few months ago, where we pledged to serve our communities with kindness, care, and justice. Now, a time when more than ever before, we had the opportunity to stay true to our oath, we were told that our services will no longer be required. Talking further, we both explored the other side of the issue. We did discuss how having medical students at the hospital increases liability as well as puts students at risk. However, reconciling with those ideas, and staying inside the house was difficult.

Sensing that many medical students felt the same as me yet recognizing our responsibility to engage in social distancing like all citizens, the next few days went into finding a sweet balance. Within days, we started seeing a rise in initiatives started by medical students to help with the COVID-19 relief.\(^1\) Initiatives like helping frontline

workers by doing grocery runs or providing child-care services. It was heart-warming to see how students from all across the globe were collaborating, reaching out, innovating and trying to support the frontline heroes.² Personally, I found myself drawn to reducing anxiety and aiding in the mental health of community members. As an Education Committee member of the Ontario Medical Students Association, I began working with medical students from all over Canada to create a series of infographics sharing resources and encouraging medical students to stay informed (*Figure 1*). I began checking in with senior residents of my building, and we tried to reassure and encourage each other. Somehow, in an attempt to physically distance, people were indeed coming together emotionally.

As days pass by, and we begin to adjust to our new online curriculum, I find myself surrounded by new dilemmas. Every news or social media outlet that I surfed was filled with ideas of being productive. From cooking challenges to exercising, and spending time with family, everyone seemed to be in a race to make efficient use of this unexpected gift of time. I am guilty of thinking similarly. I found myself being pulled in all directions. It was important for people to recognize that not doing anything productive, and simply taking care of ourselves was equally important. Just as it was important is to seek support when needed, and to realize that it is okay if we all do not come out as chefs, or athletes after this lockdown."

Even though I am not at the frontline, I feel a sense of responsibility by being associated with the profession of medicine. In some ways, living everyday through this pandemic and seeing the world cope, seems to teach me something new every day. Even though our classes are now online, and it seems scary to think we might not learn all the necessary clinical skills, I am determined to work harder. Most of all, stories of sacrifice and triumph of healthcare professionals motivate me to be a better version of myself, to be a better student, and a better physician in the future. To end off, just like all the email communications we received, I hope you are all keeping safe during these uncertain and changing times.

Learn more about education in Ontario, Canada (including infographics), volunteering opportunities and wellness during COVID-19 at the Ontario Medical Students Association website: https://omsa.ca.

About the Author: Janhavi Patel is currently a first-year medical student at the Michael G. DeGroote School of Medicine, McMaster University, Niagara Regional Campus (St. Catherines), Canada of a three-year program. She is a recipient of Ontario Medical Students Association Innovator Grant and McMaster Medical Student Research Excellence Scholarship.

Correspondence:

Janhavi Patel

Address: 100 Main St W, Hamilton, ON L8P 1H6, Canada

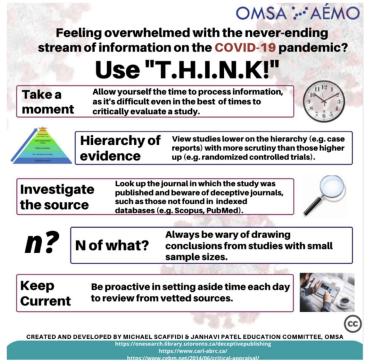
Email: janhavi.patel7397@gmail.com

Editor: Mihnea-Alexandru Găman Submission: Apr 27, 2020 Revisions required: May 21, 2020 Received in revised form: May 22, 2020 Acceptance: Jun 9, 2020 Publication: Jun 12, 2020 Process: Reviewed by Student Editors

<sup>1</sup> Bachelor of Medical Sciences (BMSc), MD Candidate, Michael G. DeGroote School of Medicine, McMaster University, Canada.

Figure 1. Infographics created with students of the Education Committee of the Ontario Medical Students Association





Patel J.

To Help or Not to Help: A First Year Canadian Medical Student's Dilemma During the COVID-19 Pandemic.

## References

- Bonilla-Escobar FJ. Leadership and Health: The Scientific Journal's Mission of Spreading Science in Times of Pandemic. Int J Med Students. 2020 Jan-Apr;8(1):9-10
- O'Connor-Terry C, Gowda T, Zuchelkowski B, Minney S, Kwon J. Medical Students Have a Powerful Role in Addressing Community Needs in the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Experience from the US. Int J Med Students. 2020 Jan-Apr;8(1):70-72.

# Acknowledgments

I would like you thank Victoria McKinnon, Michael Scaffidi and Isabella Fan of the Education Committee, Ontario Medical Students Association for consenting to share the infographics that we jointly created.

# Conflict of Interest Statement & Funding

The Authors have no funding, financial relationships or conflicts of interest to disclose.

## **Author Contributions**

Conceptualization, Writing - Original Draft Preparation, & Writing - Review & Editing: JP.

## Cite as:

Patel J. To Help or Not to Help: A First Year Canadian Medical Student's Dilemma During the COVID-19 Pandemic. Int J Med Students. 2020 May-Aug;8(2):169-71.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

ISSN 2076-6327

This journal is published by the <u>University Library System</u>, <u>University of Pittsburgh</u> as part of the <u>Digital Publishing Program</u> and is co-sponsored by the <u>University of Pittsburgh Press</u>.

