

# Medical Volunteerism in Times of COVID-19: Burden or Relief?

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## The Experience

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed our daily lives in the way we see the world and understand the events occurring around us.<sup>1</sup> We suddenly realized further the importance of being healthy and we became more appreciative of it. Greece, after a severe and lengthy financial crisis, is now coping with this pandemic and it seems that the country is admittedly doing it with success by having embraced science-driven measures. Towards this endeavor, eager to keep our society healthy, medical students across the nation, as well as across the globe, have expressed their willingness to voluntarily participate in tackling COVID-19.<sup>2,4</sup>

Recently, medical student volunteering has dominated public discourse and it is being discussed in various fora and groups with final-year medical students expressing intriguing opinions on how they could help in addressing the pandemic and provide assistance to the national health system. In times of a crisis, this kind of mobilization is truly moving and gives us hope for the future. However, the participation of medical students in the daily clinical routine could possibly pose risks and have a negative impact on society as a whole for a couple of reasons.

First of all, there is no denying that volunteerism per se amid a crisis, be it a health crisis or the climate crisis, is something to be encouraged and embraced. Outside a crisis, volunteering, as a way of living, has positively affected our communities and has played a key role in bridging gaps and mitigating social issues like poverty and social disparities. As far as the medical field is concerned, we have seen, over the years, numerous international and domestic medical volunteer placements, which have undoubtedly enhanced the health care delivery in various settings, such as refugee camps or poverty-stricken countries. Many of these placements were given to medical students, which, under the proper guidance, assisted however they could. These endeavors should be strongly encouraged, as they unquestionably foster solidarity and equality. Consequently, in times of a given crisis, volunteerism plays a crucial role in overcoming difficulties throughout various fields, and more specifically in healthcare delivery.

However, albeit volunteerism in healthcare settings by medical students is highly useful, at the present moment, they could be both a burden on the healthcare system and a risk to the society, should the

necessary conditions be not present. As SARS-CoV-2 has proven to be a highly infective virus, the participation of medical students in the daily clinical practice could lead to quicker transmission to the rest of the society, and particularly to the most susceptible, like the elderly.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, there is already a medical personal protective equipment scarcity in the healthcare system<sup>6</sup> and this problem could get worse, as students will certainly need huge amounts of this equipment. While the aforementioned factors are worth serious consideration, we should also take into account the ever-increasing and constantly updated knowledge on our understanding of viral pathogenesis. Ill-preparedness and unawareness of the latest insights and guidelines could pose a threat to public health in general. Thus, only with suitable conditions and a meticulously planned policy would the students be able to actively engage in the daily nosocomial routine.

Lately, many argue that volunteering, and more specifically in healthcare delivery, is not the solution to the difficulties our health system has been experiencing over the years and is facing now, during the pandemic, as it will most probably perpetuate the problem. It has also been expressed that the serious and long-term issues in our understaffed and overworked national healthcare system will definitely not be resolved through volunteering, and that further measures should be implemented. It could be true but solutions to long-term problems should assuredly be sought out after the crisis and when, hopefully, all of us will be there to open the relevant discussions. For now, action should be taken. We can see many of our co-citizens undertaking voluntary projects, such as the development of protective equipment for the health personnel. These actions highly relieve the crisis burden and there are many similar examples that highlight the importance of volunteering.

Having said that, medical students are right in expressing their keenness to voluntarily engage and help in every way they can. Such initiatives give us hope to move forward as an active and responsible society. Being properly prepared, having acquired up-to-date insights, and having adequate protective equipment they could actively become involved in tackling the pandemic, with safety and responsibility. As COVID-19 is a rapidly evolving situation and it seems that it will continue to be present in our daily lives, it's not too late for the medical students to gain all the necessary expertise and be ready for future waves of the infection.

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