

1 **Title:** Coping Strategies for medical students during the pandemic: A Nigerian Perspective

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- 20 1. How has COVID-19 affected medical students in Nigeria?
- 21 2. What have Nigerian medical students been doing to pass time during the restriction of movements?

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1 **THE EXPERIENCE.**

2 SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) was declared a pandemic on March 12, 2020 by the World Health Organization
3 (WHO).¹ For many medical students in Nigeria and all over the world, it was clear that there was about to be a
4 major shift in the upcoming months, not just in the academic community, but also in our everyday lives. While
5 anxiously waiting, first cases were identified in Lagos, Nigeria in late February 2020.²

6
7 In Nigeria, the medical curriculum is intensive with very little time reserved for breaks and holidays. For example,
8 in my last 4 years of being a medical student in a state-run institution, the only major official breaks we received
9 have been for public holidays. After exams, there is no official break and students resume school work and
10 classes almost immediately.

11
12 Soon schools, banks and other major institutions were shut down and the first lockdowns were imposed in
13 Nigeria.³⁻⁴ It was therefore no surprise that there was a strange combination of relief - from the exhausting work
14 at medical school; and fear of what was coming next. Ideally, the average medical student in Nigeria attending
15 a public academic institution spends more than the initial 6 years in university, due to reasons including
16 'academic staff strike' and accreditation issues. The time in school would therefore be prolonged. With that in
17 mind, the initial thought of students was that this indefinite break should be put to best use. During this time,
18 medical students' concerns were mostly related to fear and anxiety, because of the incorrect information about
19 the virus which has circulated online.

20
21 More than 6 months after this, medical students in Nigeria have developed several coping strategies in their
22 respective ways of choosing how to spend their time. This classification of what medical students were doing is
23 simply built on my personal experiences, as well as informal interactions with other medical students on their
24 perceptions as to how they are coping during this pandemic.

25
26 On the third week of March 2020, The National Universities Commission declared all tertiary-level institutions
27 to be closed down causing a halt in all academic activities.³ Although plans were immediately made by some
28 medical institutions to explore online platforms for academic engagements, the effectiveness of these platforms
29 is still under scrutiny.⁵ Nowadays, the break has made significant vicissitudes in the medical school curriculum.
30 The effect of COVID-19 pandemic on medical students' education in Nigeria could therefore be considered
31 significant, causing a disastrous effect on performance in examination post-pandemic and competency of the
32 future healthcare professionals.⁵ Even during this time, based on the interactions I had, several medical
33 students have not totally neglected their academic responsibilities. For instance, many students like myself, are
34 in the same position as a 4th year medical students in Lagos State University College of Medicine who were
35 about to take their second professional exams, but these were postponed due to the pandemic. This break had
36 been an opportunity for us to prepare more and focus fully for the upcoming exams. Others took up internships
37 in local clinics in order to build professional experience and perhaps help themselves during their clinical
38 courses.

39
40 Many medical students have also taken this opportunity to contribute towards tackling the pandemic in their own
41 way. Some have been volunteering in projects for community outreach & sensitization of the virus with the

1 donation of relief packages including food items, face masks and sanitizers.⁶ For example, since the pandemic
2 onset, I have been supervising Protostar Initiative. This project provides free online mental health services
3 (therapy and counselling) to women, girls and teenagers who have been affected by the pandemic, by
4 connecting them to volunteer mental health professionals from the comfort of their own homes.⁷ Medical
5 students contributing towards social impact is not a surprise, as medical students all over the world have long
6 been taking up initiatives to tackle problems; for example, the student-led International Federation of Medical
7 Students Association (IFMSA) which is WHO-recognized partner and has led several projects contributing
8 towards betterment of global health.⁸ Evidently, when students are active in these groups, they develop skills
9 such as advocacy, communication, public health campaigning, and the ability to work with multi-disciplinary
10 teams.⁸

11
12 It is generally known that the medical curriculum plays a major role in preparing students to be professionals in
13 their field of expertise. However, it plays a lesser role in helping students develop their potential and skills in
14 areas of leadership, team collaboration, and advancements in the area of social impact. Using myself as an
15 example, in recent times I have volunteered for different projects and worked with different organizations. This
16 has helped me to develop my personal and professional skills over time. Knowing that the medical curriculum
17 is insufficient, many students have taken this time to be more intentional about their growth, apart from the
18 academia. Many are taking online courses, learning new languages and engaging with other sectors
19 (businesses and other non-medical organizations). A handful of students has been engaged in research by
20 publishing papers and articles, while others have read self-improvement books.

21
22 Medical students have leveraged their free time by building their capacities and professional growth. In fact,
23 local medical associations have played a number of roles in this. Nigerian Medical Students Association
24 (NIMSA) is the umbrella body of over 60,000 medical students in the 38 medical schools in Nigeria, is affiliated
25 with IFMSA, and is the student arm of the Nigerian Medical Association. They have been key players in
26 contributing to the capacity building and personal development of their members; both having organized shared
27 learning opportunities such as research writing, accessing global opportunities and CV writing, for their
28 members.

29
30 The medical curriculum is one that is quite intensive and so, not much leisure is given to medical students during
31 their training. At these times, many students, especially those in their clinical training, have undoubtedly used
32 this opportunity to spend more time involved with self-improvement plans such as research, volunteering, or
33 reading. This has shown how medical students can be resourceful in times of crisis.

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