

1 **Title:** COVID-19: Turning pandemic into learning opportunity for senior medical students

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23 **Discussion Points:**

- 24 1. How has COVID-19 impacted senior medical students in the United States?  
25 2. How are medical institutions utilizing senior medical students during COVID-19?  
26 3. What role do senior medical students play in providing care during times of need?  
27

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## 1 THE EXPERIENCE.

2  
3 The COVID-19 pandemic has been unexpected and tragic; nevertheless, it has also given some medical  
4 students the opportunity to step-up, use what they have learned throughout their training, and assume an  
5 important role in providing care for patients and assistance to their healthcare institution.<sup>1-3</sup> In the United States,  
6 during the first three years of medical school students are trained to assist in patient care, work in various clinics  
7 and learn from providers. By the time medical students are in their 4th year, they have developed a fair base of  
8 knowledge and clinical skills. Normally, the 4th year of medical school is the year when students narrow down  
9 their clinical experiences to reflect their interests, and prepare for the application cycle for residency programs.  
10 The COVID-19 pandemic has made this time difficult, forcing many senior students from the frontlines to the  
11 sidelines. Policy changes have forbidden students from attending some rotations in person and scrubbing in  
12 during operational procedures. The impact COVID-19 has had on medical curricula varies between institutions,  
13 with many being hindered significantly by the event. Some institutions, however, are using novel approaches to  
14 patient care, allowing senior students to help. In this way, these academic medical institutions are making the  
15 pandemic a time of valuable experience and learning for their students.

16  
17 During this pandemic, our academic institution worked with senior medical students to implement a novel  
18 curriculum to allow them to serve our community. At my academic institution, COVID-19 has provided senior  
19 medical students the opportunity to be an asset for their affiliated healthcare system, and to earn school credit  
20 while doing so. Senior students are using telecommunication to connect with patients and assist them with their  
21 medical questions and needs. They are acting as Transitional Care Providers (TCP) and Patient Navigation  
22 Assistants (PNA), allowing them to use their knowledge and skills to help both the patients and the stressed  
23 healthcare system. As TCPs, students are making weekly contact with patients recently discharged from the  
24 hospital with COVID-unrelated ailments, to assure they have not become infected or in the case they have  
25 questions or concerns about their recent hospital admission or current recovery. Such transitional care  
26 interventions have been shown to reduce hospital readmissions and mortality.<sup>4</sup> PNAs are serving a similar role,  
27 helping patients navigate the convoluted health care system during this complicated time, a role that has been  
28 shown effective in improving patient satisfaction and outcomes.<sup>5-7</sup> In these roles, students are further learning  
29 to work with medical teams and local community resources to meet the needs of patients - many times acting  
30 as the patient's primary point-of-contact within the medical center. These roles are providing students a level of  
31 responsibility that fosters professional development in a unique time.

32  
33 At our institution, other students are acting as "COVID-19 case-trackers," investigating and attempting to  
34 mitigate the spread of infections. Case tracking of infection transmission chains is a standard aspect of public  
35 health response to infectious outbreaks. Case tracking assists in breaking these transmission chains, hopefully  
36 disrupting viral spread and reducing the scale of outbreaks.<sup>8</sup> In taking this role, medical students are becoming  
37 better versed in the pathophysiological aspects of COVID-19 and remaining up-to-date on current guidelines,  
38 all while gaining a unique experience in pandemic response. No matter their designated role, senior students  
39 are working together with other healthcare staff to address issues during this unforeseen crisis, and they are  
40 seen as members of the team when discussing novel approaches to novel problems. As we students continue  
41 to provide our services to our institution, our institution recognizes and appreciates the motivated and trained

1 asset they can call on for assistance. Likewise, we as students appreciate their respect and consideration in  
2 facing this pandemic.

3  
4 Personally, I volunteered and worked as a TCP. As a TCP, I was in weekly contact with patients and their  
5 primary care providers, assisting them in their transition home from the hospital, and with any additional needs  
6 I could appropriately address. Without exception, I was asked by each patient about COVID-19 and their risk of  
7 infection. Due to their questions, I was motivated to better understand the pathophysiology of the virus and the  
8 clinical symptoms of those infected. Moreover, I remained current on the recommendations put out by the Center  
9 for Disease Control and Prevention. In so doing, I was able to help patients with their immediate health needs  
10 and address their concerns related to COVID-19. While these experiences were not what we expected going  
11 into our 4th year of medical school, I believe that they have given us something unique. They showed us the  
12 adaptability of medicine in a time of uncertainty, and they provided us an opportunity to work within our medical  
13 institution in a time of need. Despite missing normal 4th year rotations during this time, I feel no less prepared  
14 for my residency training on the horizon. In no way do I see this experience as a hinderance to my education  
15 and training; quite the opposite, I feel that it was uniquely valuable, allowing us to be actively involved in  
16 addressing the COVID-19 pandemic instead of watching from the sidelines.

17  
18 This pandemic has been an unprecedented time, and along with its devastating impact on the health of many  
19 Americans, it has also caused major alterations in the training of future physicians. While many medical schools  
20 put a full halt in clinical experiences due to COVID-19, some schools like my institution did not, by creating and  
21 fostering student initiatives. This pandemic has led our medical center to recognize senior students as trained  
22 and motivated resources, utilizable during times of need. For some senior medical students, the COVID-19  
23 pandemic, with all of its hardships, has become an invaluable learning opportunity and chance to serve our  
24 community – it is an experience we will carry with us throughout our future careers.

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