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Medical Students' contribution to the health workforce response to COVID-19

The increasing spread of the COVID-19 virus is having an unprecedented impact on the community and on health services which are gearing up to respond to the needs of patients and the community whilst also supporting their staff in difficult times. The pandemic is also having a significant impact on medical students' learning and their clinical experiences that are an essential aspect of that learning.

In responding to these challenges, the safety of patients and of students and staff working in health services, and the continuing provision of appropriate, high-quality care to all patients is paramount.

It is clear that for high risk and high stress areas within health services, it is best that medical students not be involved and clinical placements in these areas should cease. There may also be a need in other areas to pause and readjust placements, so they are appropriate for the current situation and as it continues to evolve.

There are however important roles where medical students can make a valuable contribution to health services that does not impact other staff, supports the smooth flow of clinical work and patient care, and enables students to continue their learning. Away from the front-line of care for patients with COVID-19, students can contribute to the acute and chronic care needs of people on the hospital wards, in acute care and in community care settings. This is likely to be important in freeing up medical and nursing staff for non-routine duties.

Students in their clinical years constitute the immediate future health care workforce. Reducing placement experience to the extent that it affects progression and graduation will reduce the supply of work-ready and pandemic-cognate graduates for 2021 onwards, and we appreciate all the work that is being done to ensure this doesn't happen.

In a world where pandemics and respiratory-based viruses could be an ongoing health threat, the entire emerging health workforce will need to understand how to support whole of health systems in such scenarios. As with all other areas of clinical education, immersion in a real clinical context ensures deep and effective learning.

Medical students will make an important contribution to the health workforce response to this unprecedented and still unfolding crisis. The roles they play must be useful and safe – for themselves, patients and their colleagues.

This is a time for proactive collaboration and cooperation. Medical Deans are working closely with health services, students, regulators and other health professions to support the continuing provision of health care of the highest quality, and for our students to continue learning whilst actively, usefully and safely contributing to healthcare teams and patient care.

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