

NSW Medical Students' Council COVID-19 Position Statement

NSW Medical Students' Council (NSWMSC) is the peak representative body for over 6000 medical students at the nine medical schools across NSW and the ACT.

NSWMSC will continue to collaborate with key regulatory and advocacy bodies including the Ministry of Health, the Health and Education Training Institute (HETI), Australian Medical Association NSW (AMA NSW), and Medical Deans of Australia and New Zealand (MDANZ), and medical schools, as well as support medical students' societies in NSW and the ACT. We recognise that each of these bodies has been working tirelessly to stay informed and are responsive to the situation.

In light of the global pandemic of COVID-19, NSWMSC acknowledges the significant threat it poses to global health, as well as to the safety and wellbeing of healthcare workers and their families, including medical students. NSWMSC is aware that the pandemic will disrupt medical education, requiring significant adjustments to teaching delivery.

First and foremost, NSWMSC urges all medical schools to ensure continuous consultation and clear communication to their students through any and all processes of adjustment, in recognition of the significant impact such decisions will pose to students and the importance of their input at this time.

Through extensive consultation with NSW and ACT medical student representative societies, and ongoing discussion with key advocacy and regulatory bodies for health and medical education, NSWMSC has identified 4 key issues where comprehensive, state-wide frameworks must be implemented, discussed in this position statement:

1. Student safety and wellbeing;
2. Academic progression;
3. Educational outcomes and;
4. Medical student workforce.

NSWMSC provides this position statement with the acknowledgement that as situations radically evolve, modifications will likely be required, however the views of our constituents will be central and contribute foremost to our ongoing advocacy priorities.

1. Student Safety and Wellbeing

The safety and wellbeing of medical students is paramount. We recognise that this pandemic presents an unprecedented challenge to all Australians, especially health students and professionals at the forefront of the response. Whether personally, or as a component of the health-care system, students will need support now more than ever.

Our concerns of safety pertains to both pre-clinical and clinical students undertaking the following activities:

- Clinical Placements, including:
 - Hospital placements;
 - General Practice placements;
 - Community Placements,
 - Elective Programs, and
 - other relevant kinds of experiential learning.
- Non-Clinical Classroom Teaching
- Participation in the Workforce
- Participation in Volunteer roles

These particular student groups have been identified as particularly vulnerable:

- International students
- Rural/remote students
- Special consideration students

Underpinning all our advocacy on COVID-19, we call upon Universities, the Ministry of Health, MDANZ, HETI, Local Health Districts and Hospitals to:

- Develop and maintain frequent and open lines of communication with students;
- Ensure the safety of medical students;
- Promote effective, targeted student support and escalation pathways.

2. Academic Progression and Graduation

NSWMSC recognises the significant negative impacts of delayed graduation or course progression on individuals as well as the future health workforce, and strongly supports proactive strategies for the stability of incoming 2021 internship numbers as well as future years. To that end, NSWMSC urges medical schools to consider and address the following, and ensure key provisions and special considerations are in place for all students during this unprecedented period so as to not place any students in disadvantage for situations outside of their control.

- a. **Protecting student groups with special considerations:** students face unforeseen circumstances out of their control amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Universities must provide alternative arrangements available to such students to maintain their academic progression and graduation. Special considerations include students:
 - i. with pre-existing medical conditions which place them at higher risk of adverse health outcomes, or students with dependent or a family member to which the same applies;
 - ii. in self-isolation or quarantine;
 - iii. concerned about their personal safety during higher-risk placements (e.g. critical care, general practice) due to;
 1. lack of PPE,
 2. inappropriate supervision or training,
 3. exposure to vulnerable populations or COVID-19 positive patients;
 - iv. with dependents who may become sick, or as services and access to facilities reduce, require care;
 - v. experiencing critical levels of anxiety or stress;
 - vi. who are enrolled as international students;
 1. Obligated to return to their home countries or remain overseas, or,
 2. those experiencing other extenuating circumstances beyond their control.

- b. **Content Delivery:** NSWMSC recognises the substantial impact of COVID-19 on medical education both for pre-clinical and clinical year students. In line with government policy and social distancing, NSWMSC strongly encourages universities to minimise in-person learning activities, prepare alternative methods

of content delivery, and ensure online learning systems are sufficiently robust to deliver quality education. Universities should:

- i. minimise in-person attendance in favour of alternative methods of content delivery where this has not already occurred, and ensure maintained quality of education and technical support for staff and students;
 - ii. facilitate asynchronous learning so that increased familial responsibilities can be accommodated (in acknowledging that the time available for some students to engage in learning will be reduced during normal business hours due to school and service closures;
 - iii. engage in ongoing consultation with student cohorts and receive feedback on the quality of education delivery.
- c. **Attendance:** NSWMSC urges recognition of the increased barriers to attendance during the Covid-19 pandemic, including but not limited to self-isolation requirements and at-risk student groups, and emphasises the need for flexibility in academic and attendance requirements.
- d. **Assessments:** NSWMSC encourages medical school universities to acknowledge the unique circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic and recognise its implications for traditional examination and clinical assessment methods.
- i. Universities to explore alternative options including but not limited to online, long-distance, and alternative participation assessments, and to ensure assessment methods do not unduly disadvantage any of the at risk student groups identified.
 - ii. If assessments are to be altered, particularly for final year students, it must be done in a transparent way, in consultation with student cohorts.
 - iii. Support must be given in the circumstance that assessments are altered.
- e. **Student communication:** NSWMSC believes it is essential for universities, LHDs and NSW Health to provide unified, consistent messaging to avoid the confusion and fear generated by existing discrepancies and information silos. We believe it is essential that universities provide clear guidelines for students in a variety of contingencies including but not limited to: self-isolation, sick leave, and placements cancellations.
- f. **International students**
- i. VISA conditions and CoE (Certificate of Entitlement) should be reviewed and given an extension if unforeseen or extenuating circumstances do occur.

3. Educational Outcomes

Clinical Placements

From consultation with NSW medical student representative societies and their faculties, it is increasingly apparent that student safety, quality of learning, and academic flexibility is widely variable across NSW Local Health Districts. NSWMSC is cognisant that some placements have been cancelled completely (e.g. ED, ICU), reallocated (e.g. respiratory) or postponed indefinitely. NSWMSC acknowledges the difficulties of decision making and balancing academic outcomes with safety during this unprecedented time, and whilst we recognises the value of experiential learning on clinical placement, it is important that for placements ongoing that the following safeguards are in place:

- a. **Minimal risk:** Students must be given equal protective measures (PPE, PPE training) to other members of the team, particularly as they are patient facing, and with consideration that senior students are contributing members of the team.
- b. **Student rights:** Students should feel supported to be able to remove themselves from situations where they feel uncomfortable, vulnerable or exposed to infection without fear of academic consequences. It is essential that clear escalation pathways are defined to account for discrepancies between framework decisions and individual clinician practices and/or awareness.
- c. **Transparent State communication:** LHD specific decisions are creating confusion to students and the wider medical community, and these disparities are disempowering students from advocating for their safety and learning rights. NSWMSC calls for a standardised, equitable mandate from NSW Health specifying the placements, activities and scope of what medical students can and cannot do. If standardised mandates are determined not possible, in its place, there must be clear, accessible and specific guidelines in one centralised location for students to access addressing aforementioned details for each LHD or jurisdiction, to address this issue.

4. Medical Student Workforce

During this global pandemic of COVID-19, we appreciate and commend the work of our government, academic and student leaders who have participated in an evolving discussion around the optimal management of student academic progression, safety and assistance to the NSW Health workforce. As a Council, we affirm the desire of NSW medical students, in particular final year students, to meaningfully contribute to a national public health emergency, provided that this is undertaken within a centralised, standardised framework upholding the health, rights and scope of medical student practice.

NSWMSC believes it is imperative that a state-wide framework is developed to address Medical Student Clinical Workforce Involvement as a solution to Workforce Shortages, and that the following essential conditions be addressed and satisfied:

- a. **Voluntary:** Recruitment must be opt-in without any direct/indirect coercion. Any program must be opt-in, non-compulsory and have alternatives for students not interested in participating. This program must have clear exit strategies without personal or academic penalty or disadvantage.
- b. **Safe working conditions:** The workplace protections that apply to existing healthcare workers e.g. adequate supply of PPE and training, safe (capped) working hours, incident escalation pathways.
- c. **Fulfilment of Educational Standards:** adequate teaching supplements must be offered in place of supervised learning on wards.
 - i. The work must be endorsed by the student's university and not unduly interfere with the education of the student; nor should the position alone be deemed adequate in contributing to fulfil the clinical placement requirements of the student in the first instance.
 - ii. Universities must take into account other medical school hours where applicable and enforce work hour caps.
 - iii. Medical schools should be cognisant of special considerations and organise content delivery to be flexible and accessible off-site and during non-work hours.
- d. **Training and Supervision:** Work expectations must remain within the student's scope of practice, and adequate training and supervision must be provided otherwise. Students should be empowered to refuse any tasks they feel is outside their scope or would pose significant risk to their person or others.

- e. **Adequate Support:** Establish and highlight clear and robust escalation and support pathways for students, communicated clearly and regularly. Clear mental health support systems in place, continuous and proactive support programs for students beyond that of university level services to address student mental health needs.
- f. **Entitlements:** Employment must be clearly stipulated in contractual agreements, and include remuneration, allowances for sick leave, indemnity, and other relevant industrial protections.

If you are a medical student with any concerns at all, please reach out firstly to your medical society, or directly to us through Facebook, email, or our website, *your confidentiality will be respected, your name and or details will only be escalated with your consent.* NSWMSC will continue to support our medical societies and students and advocate for your rights and secure the most optimal outcome for you.

Yours Sincerely,



Alice Shen

President, NSW Medical Students' Council