

23 March 2020

Medical student safety and wellbeing in the COVID-19 health workforce

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

As a council we recognise the need to monitor and engage with public health efforts during the current rapid and unprecedented spread of COVID-19 within Australia. Our subsequent concerns involve student education outcomes and wellbeing, as well as the sustainability of the future medical workforce.

NSWMSC recognise the critical role that medical students may play in the unfolding response to COVID-19 and affirm that NSW students have a strong desire to assist and contribute over the coming month for the greater public good where there is a clear and present need.

However we hope to ensure that models moving forward address key aspects of student welfare and incorporate rights and protections for students in this unprecedented time. To that end, NSWMSC has identified key areas of concern regarding the surged student workforce. When students are asked to address health workforce shortages, especially in the context of replacing parts or the entirety of normal clinical placements, we implore the following must be clearly addressed and satisfied:

1. Recruitment Conditions

- a. Voluntary and without direct or indirect coercion. Any program must be opt-in, non-compulsory and have alternatives for students not interested in participating.
 - i. Students with medical comorbidities, dependents or family members with conditions that make them high-risk, among other complicating circumstances, may not be prepared to participate in workforce programs and should not be expected to.
- b. Clear exit strategies outlined with no detriments to academic progression or career prospects.

2. Fulfilling Educational Standards

The opportunity for experiential learning is not lost on students, however, adequate teaching supplements must be offered in place of supervised learning on wards. All efforts must be made to ensure that medical students are able to graduate on time, so as to avoid an internship crisis in the coming years. However, these efforts need to be balanced with ensuring that medical students are fit for practice.

- a. 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.
- b. Universities must take into account other medical school hours where applicable and enforce work hour caps.
- c. Asynchronous learning must be facilitated 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.
- d. Medical schools should be cognisant of special considerations and organise content delivery to be flexible and accessible off-site and during non-work hours.

Thereby we affirm that the position may contribute to fulfilling clinical placement requirements, provided that:

1. It is not the sole method of fulfilling these requirements;
2. It meets AMC/university learning objectives;
3. Reasonable alternatives are provided for those who cannot fill these positions for personal and/or health reasons, or due to carer responsibilities;
4. Students who do not participate in work are not disadvantaged with respect to fulfilling their clinical placement requirements.

3. Adequate Training and Scope

Workplace tasks and expectations must remain within the student's scope of practice, it is difficult to predict the extent of involvement for medical students as a last resort measure in a workforce, however, where students are being asked to perform any tasks, there must be:

- a. adequate training and supervision to ensure that students are not practising outside of their scope;
- b. an ability to refuse any tasks that are outside of their provided or own perceived level of scope;
- c. clear and robust escalation and support pathways for students.

4. Entitlements

Students should be provided with an employment contract covering;

- a. provisions for sick leave or leave for self-isolation and other entitlements afforded to healthcare workers.
- b. remuneration for their work;
- c. access to indemnity insurance and full workplace and industry protections in the same way healthcare workers are protected, and should not attract liability;

Additionally we stress that there must be clear limitations on working hours to prevent intentional or unintentional overworking of a vulnerable workforce unfamiliar with the healthcare system and its employment protocols, and a vulnerable workforce introduced to the bottom of the hospital hierarchy.

5. Student Safety and Mental Health and Wellbeing

The coming situation is volatile, unprecedented, and students will experience difficulties of loss either personally, or as a component of an under-equipped health system. Medical students are to be radically introduced to the workforce, the abrupt nature of this needs to be acknowledged. To ensure student safety, mental well health and wellbeing is upheld, hospitals must:

- a. Ensure appropriate PPE is provided and accessible, as well as appropriate training on its use, as would be for all healthcare workers.
- b. Establish and highlight clear and robust escalation and support pathways for students, communicated clearly and regularly.
- c. 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.

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 advocate for your rights and secure the most optimal outcome for you.

Yours Sincerely,



Alice Shen

President, NSW Medical Students' Council