

The role of the medicine student in COVID-19 pandemic. A shared responsibility

El papel del estudiante de medicina ante la pandemia de COVID-19. Una responsabilidad compartida

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The declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020 has forced us to look at the training process of students of health sciences, including medicine, with a new perspective, which has generated a complete alteration of the operation that we regarded as normal in the faculties and schools of medicine and health sciences, all over the world, and has caused a disruption of medical education¹.

Everything changed and we do not have access to our classrooms, laboratories, simulation centers, and communities, let alone to the main training scenario, the clinical area. Primary care health centers and secondary and tertiary care hospitals have been forced to limit student access, since their priority at this moment is patients infected with the new virus and those suffering from all other diseases. Today, virtuality is the only safe scenario^{1,2}.

Unlike other disciplines, both teachers and students play an active role in the tasks inherent to the profession. Therefore, it is time to rethink the role played by health professionals in training, not only to maintain the continuity of their learning processes, but also to become agents that are part of the health sector

response without putting their safety and patients safety at risk³.

This commitment of health education institutions to train to help in view of the situation includes, on one hand, the need to continue with the training of health professionals with other educational modalities that protect the integrity and safety of those involved, and on the other, the desire to join efforts to address the increase in health needs resulting from the pandemic⁴.

The Mexican Association of Faculties and Schools of Medicine⁵ and the Association of American Medical Colleges⁶ spoke out by recommending temporarily suspension of clinical activities in hospital settings for medical and health sciences undergraduate students. The need to prevent students from accessing hospital clinical environments is due to the imminent change in the conditions of care, patient safety, and limited resources for personal protection in health systems.

The operation of hospitals, as their services are being overwhelmed due to patient care related to the COVID-19 pandemic, becomes complex, and students at clinical or internship cycles do not have yet the necessary skills to integrate into the teams of health

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personnel participating in patient care. This limitation of students is another factor that prevents them from being incorporated during the early stages of the crisis, which is added to issues related to safety of the patient, the health teams, and the student himself. In addition, there is also a limitation of hospital centers for dedicating themselves to the usual academic activities, such as providing care and tutoring to students, given that, in this complex situation, the priority are the patients, and both human and material resources (personal protective equipment, medical equipment and supplies, and among others) have to be available and destined to this purpose.

During health crises, such as current COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential to generate an action plan that considers the diversity of educational needs of professionals in training, according to their training stage.

In accordance with the recommendations of health authorities and official provisions, the suspension of face-to-face activities guarantees the protection of students in their 1st years of training. Therefore, the transformation to a distance educational model allows academic continuity, partially or completely according to available resources.

For all the above, the following activities are suggested for students of basic sciences: support in the dissemination of scientific information that contributes to nutritional, physical, and emotional well-being during the contingency, creation of support teams for their peers to mitigate the physical and social impact that the isolation situation produces, and clinical discussion groups through online activities.

In their article "Preparing to help: response strategy of schools of medicine and health sciences to COVID19 pandemic", Valdez et al.⁴ mention that, depending on the training stage of students, the degree of responsibility and decision-making that students have in a clinical setting is different. Therefore, the analysis of students' participation during the contingency should be carried out based on the academic grade and the level of mastery of clinical competencies they possess. Participation of clinical sciences' students can take place if there is: (1) availability of personal protective equipment; (2) guaranteed protection, surveillance/monitoring of comprehensive well-being; and (3) if required, medical care. It is important for the level of participation of students at advanced stages of clinical training to be supervised and tutored by a clinical expert. His participation is largely as an observer of the care process without obstructing the

dynamics of care. The student will be able to be guided by the role model following the actions of his tutor and of the experts who are providing care to potentially infected patients; he will have to follow an algorithm for observing clinical patterns to identify the mechanism of clinical reasoning that leads to making decisions regarding diagnosis and therapeutic measures. It is important to consider that, according to the severity of the health crisis, trainee personnel become a professional reserve that could come into action in a situation of national emergency if a shortage of health personnel occurs⁴.

In such a scenario, or in case that regulation by governmental or institutional entities prevents students from being separated from clinical care areas, the institution upholding said impediment will have to comply with the responsibility for the training and safety of students for patient care, and will have to guarantee to the students the training, personal protective equipment, and the application of protocols that allow them to participate in a safe and efficient manner, both for themselves and for other people with whom they interact (patients, health personnel, colleagues, and patient family members). It is also time for teachers to develop and implement educational innovations during their teaching activities and to be a role model for their students.

Therefore, for undergraduate students (clinical cycle students and undergraduate interns) and for medical interns on social service, the Mexican Association of Medical Schools and Faculties (AMFEM – *Asociación Mexicana de Facultades y Escuelas de Medicina*) strongly requests for the following recommendations and measures to be complied with:

- Withdrawal from screening, emergency, critical, and/or specialized areas for the care of potentially COVID-19-infected patients or from any other clinical risk scenario.
- Adequate personal protective equipment without making distinctions with staff health personnel.
- Formal training for self-protection, as well as clear procedural protocols for the detection of COVID-19 cases.
- Guarantee of the care of their health and, if necessary, of sequelae of a possible infection.
- Withdrawal of students with risk factors.
- Supervision of mental health through accompaniment and psychological care.
- Open lines of communication with institutional and university teaching authorities, addressing the particular needs that might arise.

Failure to comply with these guidelines would make the presence of students at these clinical settings unviable due to an increased risk, both for them and their family environments and for patients.

We emphasize the need to recognize the shared responsibility between health and educational institutions in overseeing compliance with all the recommendations that are proposed for the incorporation of undergraduate medical students into clinical environments with the purpose to collaborate during the pandemic ensuring their safety and that of their environments.

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