

**CORRESPONDENCE**

Preparing medical students for global challenges beyond COVID-19

The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has highlighted the globalisation of modern healthcare challenges. As medical issues become increasingly globalised, healthcare professionals face new obstacles. Global problems require global solutions, and modern-day doctors must master collaboration across different countries and different disciplines, all whilst working in a world full of misleading information. As medical students, we are convinced that these skills and attitudes will be even more crucial in the coming years. We believe that we must start developing them now, in order to shape the future role of a “globalised” doctor.

COVID-19 is reported to cause respiratory tract infection, and infected individuals can present with fever, cough, breathlessness, and potentially fatal complications including respiratory distress syndrome and renal failure.^{1,2} Dissemination of respiratory droplets produced when patients cough or sneeze lead to person-to-person transmission.³ Symptomatic patients are thought to be the most contagious; however, the disease can be spread even before obvious symptoms appear.⁴ Consequently, the spread of infection has led to a pandemic and global panic, causing flight cancellations, stranded cruise ships, thousands of news headlines, and millions of social media posts. The severity of this issue led the World Health Organisation to declare COVID-19 a global emergency in January, and as of April 3, 2020, there have been 972 640 confirmed cases worldwide and 50 325 deaths.^{5,6} The spread of this virus has exemplified how rapidly future problems may similarly reach a global scale.

In a changing landscape, filled with unpredictability, the role of a doctor must constantly evolve to fulfil the needs of society. Recent environmental protests, for example, have instigated wide debate on the impact of climate. Shifting weather patterns and excessive pollution will result in an increased incidence of cardiorespiratory disease, exerting more pressure on healthcare systems. Despite this, the potential health implications of global warming remained a minor focus of public discussion. It is important that doctors portray a medical perspective to policymakers and to the general public, thus ensuring the health ramifications of such topics are not under-represented. Hence, medical students must prepare to engage in such matters in the future.

In the current digital era, the general public receives a lot of medical information from unreliable sources, particularly through “click-bait” headlines and posts shared via social media. COVID-19 has led to

widespread transmission of information (and misinformation) across these channels, spreading both useful and harmful messages. Modern doctors have to navigate patients through the complexities of evidence-based medicine in the consultation room, but also across the Internet. Furthermore, to combat increasingly complex issues, many different professions will have to collaborate to formulate efficient solutions. Doctors must master working in interdisciplinary teams that may include politicians, engineers, environmentalists, and other professionals. Moreover, these teams may span across continents and thus, doctors must develop competencies in cross-cultural communication to effectively cooperate with different communities.

As medical students, we believe it is the role of the doctor to foresee and adapt to potential healthcare challenges. At medical school, we are equipped with the skills and attitudes that shape the doctors we will become. We believe that we should begin preparing for the globalisation of medical issues as early as possible. This will require us to learn and adapt; however, we need medical schools to educate us on the current barriers to developing worldwide solutions and support us in seeking opportunities to acquire the necessary experience. Global health modules, medical electives, research exchange programmes, and healthcare leadership courses are offered by some of the medical schools in the United Kingdom. However, the accessibility of these opportunities is still limited, and most exist as optional components, which are available predominantly towards the end of undergraduate education. Furthermore, topics such as digital health remain under-represented in the current curriculum. Such modules could educate students on handling mass information from the Internet. We believe that earlier and better integrated access to these opportunities will prepare us for future challenges similar to COVID-19.

The coronavirus crisis has demonstrated the new challenges healthcare professionals must overcome in the future. COVID-19 has required doctors around the world to work with local authorities and international bodies, as well as with each other, to limit the effects of the outbreak. This situation has also illustrated the importance of communication between the world of evidence-based medicine and the general public. We believe the primary role of the doctor will always be to treat their patients, but we must prepare to be the generation that redefines the role of our profession in a globalised world.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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