

Coping Strategies for Medical Students During the Pandemic: A Nigerian Perspective

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The Experience

SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) was declared a pandemic on March 12, 2020 by the World Health Organization (WHO).¹ For many medical students in Nigeria and all over the world, it was clear that there was about to be a major shift in the upcoming months, not just in the academic community, but also in our everyday lives. While anxiously waiting, the first cases were identified in Lagos, Nigeria in late February 2020.²

In Nigeria, the medical curriculum is intensive with very little time reserved for breaks and holidays. For example, in my last 4 years of being a medical student in a state-run institution, the only major official breaks we received have been for public holidays. After exams, there is no official break and students resume classes almost immediately.

Soon schools, banks and other major institutions were shut down and the first lockdowns were imposed in Nigeria.^{3,4} It was therefore no surprise that there was a strange combination of relief - from the exhausting work at medical school; and fear of what was coming next. Ideally, the average medical student in Nigeria attending a public academic institution spends more than the initial 6 years in university. This is due to a number of reasons including 'academic staff strike' and accreditation issues. Since the time in school would therefore be prolonged, the initial thought of students was that this indefinite break should be put to best use. During this time, medical students' concerns were mostly related to fear and anxiety, because of the incorrect information about the virus which has circulated online.

More than 6 months after this, medical students in Nigeria have developed several coping strategies in their respective ways of choosing how to spend their time. This classification of what medical students were doing is simply built on my personal experiences, as well as informal interactions with other medical students on their perceptions as to how they are coping during this pandemic.

On the third week of March 2020, The National Universities Commission declared all tertiary-level institutions to be closed down causing a halt in all academic activities.³ Although plans were immediately made by some medical institutions to explore online platforms for academic engagements, the effectiveness of these platforms is still under scrutiny.⁵ Nowadays, the break has made significant vicissitudes in the medical school curriculum. The effect of COVID-19 pandemic on medical students' education in Nigeria could therefore be considered significant, causing a disastrous effect on performance in examination post-pandemic and competency of the future healthcare professionals.⁵ Even during this time, based on the interactions I had, several medical students have not totally neglected their academic responsibilities. For instance, many students like myself, are in the same position as a 4th year medical student in Lagos State University College of Medicine who were about to take their second professional exams, but these were

postponed due to the pandemic. This break had been an opportunity for us to prepare more and focus fully for the upcoming exams. Others took up internships in local clinics in order to build professional experience and to perhaps help themselves during their clinical courses.

Many medical students have also taken this opportunity to contribute towards tackling the pandemic in their own way. Some have been volunteering in projects for community outreach & sensitization of the virus with the donation of relief packages including food items, face masks and sanitizers.⁶ For example, since the pandemic onset, I have been supervising Protostar Initiative. This project provides free online mental health services (therapy and counselling) to women, girls and teenagers who have been affected by the pandemic, by connecting them to volunteer mental health professionals from the comfort of their own homes.⁷ Medical students contributing towards social impact is not a surprise, as medical students all over the world have long been taking up initiatives to tackle problems; for example, the student-led International Federation of Medical Students Association (IFMSA) which is WHO-recognized partner and has led several projects contributing towards betterment of global health.⁸ Evidently, when students are active in these groups, they develop skills such as advocacy, communication, public health campaigning, and the ability to work with multi-disciplinary teams.⁸

It is generally known that the medical curriculum plays a major role in preparing students to be professionals in their field of expertise. However, it plays a lesser role in helping students develop their potential and skills in areas of leadership, team collaboration, and advancements in the area of social impact. Using myself as an example, I have volunteered for different projects and worked with different organizations. This has helped develop my personal and professional skills over time. Knowing that the medical curriculum is insufficient, many students have taken this time to be more intentional about their growth, apart from the academia. Many are taking online courses, learning new languages and engaging with other sectors (businesses and other non-medical organizations). A handful of students has been engaged in research by publishing papers and articles, while others have read self-improvement books.

Medical students have leveraged their free time by building their capacities and professional growth. In fact, local medical associations have played a number of roles in this. Nigerian Medical Students Association (NIMSA) is the umbrella body of over 60,000 medical students in the 38 medical schools in Nigeria, is affiliated with IFMSA, and is the student arm of the Nigerian Medical Association. They have been key players in contributing to the capacity building and personal development of their members; both having organized shared learning

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opportunities such as research writing, accessing global opportunities and CV writing, for their members.

The medical curriculum is one that is quite intensive and so, not much leisure is given to medical students during their training. At these times, many students, especially those in their clinical training, have undoubtedly used this opportunity to spend more time involved with

self-improvement plans such as research, volunteering, or reading. This has shown how medical students can be resourceful in times of crisis.

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