

LETTER TO EDITOR



Assessing the Decision of Utilizing Undergraduate Medical Scholars and Nursing Students for Mitigating COVID-19 Second Wave

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Abstract

Going through the euphoria of false victory due to herd immunity by the beginning of 2021, India stepped into the critical stage after emergence of new strains of COVID-19. With more than 20.2 million cases being reported, a rolling average of 4,12,262 cases daily and death tolls crossing 3980 per day, hospitals and health workers are overwhelmed and exhausted across the country. As a result, here comes the need for a draconian step to be taken soon. With the virus spreading to 220 countries extensively, the human toll in India after the second wave is surely more than double the number of humans killed over 320 natural disasters during the recent two decades. COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption in social, political and education system in history till date. Considering this acute crisis, the union government has decided to deploy final year undergraduate medical scholars and nursing students to COVID dedicated duties across the country.

Through this letter to editor, the authors have tried to critically analyze the major advantages and disadvantages of this decision. A few measures, if taken care of, this decision will definitely help to strengthen our current health care system.

Keywords: COVID-19, medical curriculum, pandemic

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1 | INTRODUCTION

With India struggling in the battle from the second wave of COVID-19 and reporting more than 4 lakh cases a day in the first week of May and about 37 lakh active cases at the

time of peak of infection, the overburdened health-care system is virtually on the brink of collapse (1). India being the second most populous country in the world, harbors the likelihood of infecting the highest number of individuals if the rate of spread continues at the current trend (2). The magnitude of the pan-

demic has led to the number of patients exceeding far beyond the capacity of hospital beds. All this has put a huge burden on the healthcare system of India. And with the new challenge in the form of mucormycosis epidemic haunting the country the government of India on 3rd may 2021 decided to utilize pre-final and final year students of MBBS, intern doctors of the country along with B.Sc./GNM Qualified Nurses in full-time COVID nursing duties under the supervision of senior doctors and nurses along with other decisions like postponement of postgraduate (PG) entrance examinations (like NEET-PG) so that more staff will be available for management of this deadly pandemic wave (3).

These students will be utilized in telecommunication and monitoring of mild COVID-19 cases under the supervision of senior doctors. Doctors, nurses and other paramedical staff are the backbone of the war, they are the frontline workers in the management of COVID, but because of unprecedented rise in cases, it has put a gigantic burden on the frontline workers. Taking this unanimous step will not only help in reducing the workload on the doctors but will also help in better management of critical patients as a senior doctor will be able to provide better care for the infected population (3).

There will be great help to the medical scholars as this draconian step will provide them early clinical exposure and make them familiar with the working environment of the hospital. As working in COVID ward is a very stressful job, this will also help them in learning stress management in early years of their medical life which will help them later in their career (3). These students will also be provided with incentives like priority in regular government jobs along with proper vaccination against COVID-19 (3). All such professionals who sign up for a

minimum of 100 days of COVID duty and complete it successfully will also be given the Prime Minister's distinguished "COVID-19 National Service Samman" from the Government of India (3).

But every major decision has to be taken with a pinch of salt. When we critically analyze this step of the central government, we find that it will not only harm the studies of upcoming generations of medical and nursing students but will also put the life of an untrained individual in danger. Working in COVID wards for long hours and odd timings will definitely affect their academic performance and will force them to leave classes. Already affected by indefinite postponement of classes in colleges and universities, clinical exposure of the medical and nursing scholars has already dwindled since a year ago! Enforcing such untrained medical staff into the arena of compassionate care in dedicated COVID wards would prove quite dangerous. India has witnessed the deaths of 646 doctors alone in the second wave (4). They were fully trained professionals. Now, the question arises on how justified are we on putting untrained individuals in COVID-19 management and risking their lives as well as of their family. Violence against doctors and health workers is not uncommon, the incidence seems to be high and unprecedented in India during this pandemic (5). Any such incident will leave a bad mark on the young mind of our students. Further this may lead to increase in the incidence of violence as medical and nursing students are not fully trained to evade mistakes. Ultimately, there will be a decrease in confidence of patients upon the medical fraternity.

In some of the primary and secondary COVID care centers and wards of the rural areas, undergraduate medical and nursing students are posted without proper orientation and training classes. This not only affects patient care but also increases the risk of exposure to this deadly corona virus. In many states like Himachal Pradesh these health care workers are not reimbursed adequately. Medical and nursing students were paid even lesser than the minimum wage workers of the state which will cause their morale to go down finally and provoke them to search for easy ways to avoid work during duty hours (6).

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COVID-19 has already affected the spirit of many health care workers. We must not let it affect the spirit of our young doctors and nurses who are the future backbones of our country. A few constructive measures can tread the path ahead:

1. There should be proper orientation classes and demonstration on donning and doffing techniques of personal protective equipment (PPE) for these students.
2. Students working in COVID-19 wards should be taught about the clinical features, categorization, diagnosis and management of the disease. At all times, they should be instructed to work under supervision of senior staff members only.
3. They should be made aware about the current protocol for the diagnosis, management and when to refer a patient to higher center for better management.
4. There should be proper reimbursement in the form of appropriate stipend and bonus marks to cover for academic losses.
5. There should be proper arrangements of security to prevent any incident of violence at the working site.

India is fighting against coronavirus and mucormycosis boldly. It is our responsibility to stand beside our government and help to implement the national policies in this time of crisis. A few steps as mentioned above can help to strengthen our health care setup so that we build a better tomorrow. The day is not far away when we hope to get victory over this so-called never ending battle.

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