

Abstract Title:

Current Gaps in Medical Education as Illustrated by the COVID-19 Pandemic: Interviews with Physicians Across Various Medical Specialties

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Background

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous articles have been published on the financial strain on medical practices, physician burnout and mental health, and the disproportionate impact of the virus on certain socioeconomic and underserved populations. Despite a small number of articles describing the switch from in-person to virtual classrooms and standardized patient encounters to telehealth visits, literature that addresses how to prepare future physicians for the many issues highlighted by the pandemic is scarce. In this study, we interviewed faculty and resident physicians across various medical specialties to learn the common challenges physician and physician trainees faced during the pandemic and subsequently determine opportunities for updates to the current medical school curriculum.

Methods

Physicians across Colorado from various medical specialties and unique practice environments were interviewed. A standard set of interview questions was developed that focused on the impact of the pandemic in the context of physicians' practices, the effect on patient care, adaptations, and the impact on trainees' education. Audio files of the interviews were transcribed, analyzed, and tallied according to a list of systematically established themes. The final data was reviewed to identify common and critical themes that could be used as an opportunity to create a positive transformation to medical education.

Results

Thirty-one physicians across 20 different medical specialties and sub-specialties were interviewed within the month of April 2020. Analysis of the interviews identified a number of common themes including a lack of data to drive clinical decisions, the presentation of unique and positive training opportunities from practicing medicine amidst a pandemic and learning to adapt to new obstacles, challenges in communication with patients and their families, patient anxiety, and the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on underserved communities. Next steps include the administration and analysis of a follow-up survey of proposed innovative solutions for all interviewed physicians.

Conclusion

These common themes brought to light the gaps in our healthcare system and present an opportunity to better equip future physicians to address these issues through modifications to the current medical school curriculum. Challenging trainees to navigate complex cases that may lack absolute answers would emphasize critical thinking and better prepare physicians for the uncertainties and complexities of medicine. As telehealth has transformed healthcare delivery, students must learn to navigate the nuances of virtual care without sacrificing the quality of care, and the increased prevalence of anxiety has highlighted the importance of being adequately trained to identify and address mental health disorders regardless of medical specialty. Lastly, the pandemic's disproportionate impact on underserved populations emphasizes the importance for students to be well-versed on topics such as health equity, policy reform and advocacy, and economics in ways that allow for actionable change.