

Impact of COVID-19 on a Mentorship Program for Pediatrics Residents

Impacto de la COVID-19 en un programa de mentoría para residentes de pediatría

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Mr. Editor,

The onset of COVID-19 in Brazil and specifically in Porto Alegre demanded that Hospital de Clínicas de Porto Alegre (HCPA - a public tertiary university hospital located in southern Brazil) devised a set of protocols to deal with the new reality posed by this emerging virus. As the hazardous situation worsened, physician trainees were demanded to rearrange their work schedule, with modification of rotation sequence, and some rotations not being considered while others being shortened. Furthermore, despite the fact that the number of hours residents are supposed to work is regulated, the residency shift has gone beyond the regular work schedule for all the pediatrics residents. Regarding educational activities (such as lectures and grand rounds), they have now been largely done online. As predicted, all these are certainly contributing factors increasing considerably the levels of stress among residents.

Burnout peaks earlier in residency training, at least concerning the emotional exhaustion dimension. First-year residents are learning to navigate the health care system as providers and adjusting to their new roles as physicians. A fitful sleep quality, high patient-related loads and lower medical knowledge are some of the potential stress-causing sources relative to the initial training years¹.

Stress has a cumulative effect and inconsiderable things may trigger reactions. Thus, advice for maintaining the level of our staff's well-being during and later after COVID-19 phases includes evaluation of its psychological response, which is likely to vary over the phases of the outbreak. Preparation phase includes anticipatory anxiety; active phase basically refers to heroics and surge toward solution, and disillusionment and exhaustion; recovery phase includes recovery and long-term psychological impacts. These three stages may not be sequential, depending on the course of the COVID-19 outbreak².

As professors and physicians, COVID-19 has struck mentors as well. Changes in medical education called for adaptation related to cancelling in-person medical classes, which were replaced with recorded lectures or live-streams³. Many factors contribute to increasing the risk of developing emotional issues in medical doctors during the assistance for patients with known or suspected COVID-19, such as facing long work shifts, the fear of autoinoculation, as well as the concern about the possibility of spreading the virus to their family members, friends and colleagues⁴. In the case of physicians in small private practices, wage cut may be an extra source of distress⁵. Besides, due to the exponential increase in the demand for healthcare, faculty is being called in to work, and with schools and daycares temporarily closed, such context

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presents unique challenges of taking care of children and meeting the work demand⁴.

HCPA's Mentorship Program for pediatrics residents was implemented in 2019. The program was designed to provide residents (especially first-year residents) with faculty support and guidance. The program goals include promoting career development, helping to balance both work and personal lives, and offer advice to those encountering either personal or professional difficulties during the pediatric training program. The program particularly aims to help to prevent burnout. All thirteen residents (11 females; 2 males) were paired with voluntary professors of pediatrics (8 females; 4 males) following a one-on-one mentoring model (except for one professor providing assistance for two residents). At the end of the first year, an anonymous survey found that the mentoring program had a positive result: 85% of the residents considered that their level of satisfaction with the program was 4 or 5 (on a 6-point likert scale), while 15% of them answered it was 2 or 3. In 2020, three professors joined the program and ten professors decided to continue to take part as mentors.

Quite appropriately, the pediatrics residency program coordinator promptly drew up a special plan to provide additional support to pediatrics trainees at the onset of COVID-19 outbreak (working in parallel with the mentorship program). It consisted of weekly meetings with one of the HCPA psychologists, which were truly valuable for providing additional support to the residents.

Indeed, the pandemic influenced our mentorship program. The current group of mentors (7 females; 5 males) has recently completed an anonymous questionnaire that quantified the impact of the pandemic on mentorship activities. Fifty-four percent of them stated that they have had less time to dedicate to their mentees. As to the other fraction of the respondents, the pandemic has not changed time availability. The quality of the support offered to the residents seemed to be less affected, with 46% of the

mentors answering that it got worse, while 8% of them found it turned out better.

Mentors are expected to have some key qualities that help to ensure a successful relationship with their respective mentee. Desired characteristics are extensive and encompass availability, enthusiasm, and willingness to provide feedback⁶. Taking these features into account, it is understandable that some requirements may not be completely met in the present circumstances. In addition, virtual mentoring meetings may also contribute to hinder the relationship confidence, especially if the matched pair had never personally met before.

Medicine and mentorship require leadership attributes and compelling necessity of strong leadership is heightened during a pandemic, when leader roles are magnified⁷. On the other hand, as health professionals, we must be likewise capable of identifying the emotional aspects arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. As a mentorship team, it is important to establish an atmosphere of reciprocity and empathic cooperation, encouraging communication within the group to facilitate intra-team support. In the role of program coordinator, I firmly believe that it is helpful to attempt to relieve the pressure associated with meeting schedules, to assist in minimizing any difficulty that may arise along with a matched pair. Still, to restore the true meaning and purpose of mentoring. Mentors are also dealing with extreme conditions and they should focus on what is absolutely important to the mentee at this time. Primarily, one should consider their safety, emotional and psychological state. Particularly currently, it is crucial to remember the human and empathetic part of the mentoring relationship⁸, which is vital to achieve its long-term success.

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