

Incoming med students: How will training start amid a pandemic?

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Medicine is a profession that requires some comfort with ambiguity. For incoming medical students beginning training during a pandemic, picking up that skill will be among their first lessons.

In typical times, new medical students come to campus in mid-August for orientation and a White Coat ceremony. However, during these atypical times, while that is happening in some locations, others are starting training online with the hopes of transitioning to a more traditional curricular environment in the coming months. Here are some common themes new medical students should be aware of.

Learn how medical schools are protecting learners during the pandemic.

Schools maintaining flexibility

With the COVID-19 situation everchanging, medical schools are asking students to be flexible. Schools are working to get students on campus when it is safe and they have the bandwidth to handle new learners.

At Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU) in Portland, the school is on the quarter system. To date, they plan on using online learning through at least mid-September. After that, OHSU is going to weigh the gravity of the pandemic in the area.

AMA member George Mejicano, MD, OHSU's senior associate dean for education, believes students will be doing mostly remote learning for the first few months of school, but hopes to bring them on campus for experiential elements of learning in the ensuing months.

One question he's hearing from students: Should I hold off on moving? His answer is, "No." "Students want clarity, but we as a school, are also on the side of maintaining flexibility," Dr. Mejicano said. "If you want clarity, move now. As soon as we can make a decision regarding in-person

instruction, we're going to do so. We aren't going to have lectures in-person. But experiential learning, building clinical skills and simulation exercises, those are by design in-person."

Learn how medical schools are innovating to engage students.

Skill building and logistical considerations

The need to get students on campus as soon as it is safe is one most medical schools are aware of and monitoring. Part of the reason for urgency is the necessary skill development that takes place in the first year of training. Some learning requires proper equipment and supervision.

"It's hard to say how students can develop the skills that are needed if they can't actually practice them," Dr. Mejicano said. "When they get on campus, we can't just ask them to take a patient's blood pressure if they have never put a cuff on somebody."

In addition to the question related to direct learning, there are several logistical challenges students at all medical schools will confront. Among them: access to student services that can offer help with financial aid, transportation to and from campus given that many public transit systems have imposed capacity limits, and building a community among new students in the context of restrictions on gathering in large groups.

"Decisions are going to be made in adjusted time fashion," Dr. Mejicano said. "As soon as we can make a decision regarding returning students to in-person instruction and bringing students back, we are going to do it. I just can't tell you today when that will be true."

The AMA has curated a selection of resources to assist residents, medical students and faculty during the COVID-19 pandemic to help manage the shifting timelines, cancellations and adjustments to testing, rotations and other events at this time.