2nd COVID class: What one medical school plans for new students

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2020 was a year of forced adaptation for medical schools. In-person activities, particularly those that involved pre-clinical students, moved to virtual forums.

With the vaccine’s distribution continuing to expand, the 2021 school year could be one that will see a return to some level of normalcy. What should incoming medical students expect? AMA member Carol A. Terregino, MD, senior associate dean for education and academic affairs at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, offered some insight on that question. “I’m optimistic that things will be better by July 19 when our first-year medical students arrive,” she said. “We anticipate significant modifications to restrictions on indoor learning, but that has yet to happen. So we’re asking course directors to have contingency plans.”

Two new classes

At Rutgers, medical students starting in 2020 were not obligated to move to campus. Because of that, there is a contingent of Rutgers medical students who have yet to move to the area. In a way, Dr. Terregino said, this year will be like bringing in two new classes of med students.

“This rising second-year class has had such an unusual experience,” she said. “We are planning to do an enhanced orientation for our second-year class. We are planning—once the distancing can be sorted out—to have white coat ceremonies for the incoming class and the second-year class.” Rutgers also plans a robust orientation for incoming M1s.

“We lucky feel fortunate anticipating an in-person orientation for our first-year class,” Dr. Terregino said. “It’s a week of large and small group activities where incoming students work with upper class students as peer mentors. It is a very important time for relationship building; these students will learn together over the next four years. We are confident our rising M1s are going to have a more
normal educational experience.”

Testing remains a question

Students at Rutgers have been permitted to attend some lectures in person—conforming to strict capacity limitations—if they have been tested and results indicate they don’t have COVID-19. Any students participating in activities in the medical school or at clinical sites must be tested on a weekly basis.

In the future vaccination status could be a factor that influences testing protocols. It’s unclear how vaccination prevalence will influence testing in the fall.

“We’ve notified our incoming class that we will be requiring immunizations,” Dr. Terregino said. “Whether testing continues at its current frequency is another story. As in the general population, surveillance has identified some positive tests among fully vaccinated students.”

Digital component to learning

Even before the pandemic, lecture halls were not necessarily full. The further along medical students get in their training, the more likely they are to consume a lecture through media such as videos or podcasts. That is likely to continue, even when capacity restrictions are lifted, Dr. Terregino believes.

One aspect of the curriculum she sees continuing to be taught in a remote forum is telehealth. Our clerkship students have had relatively normal in-person patient interactions, even though they have not been caring for known COVID positive patients. It is for pre-clerkship students that Dr. Terregino is hoping for more in-person patient interactions.

“Zoom can be used to teach about telehealth,” Dr. Terregino said. “That’s something I think will stay. But there’s nothing like having a patient sitting across from you, being able to lay hands upon them. Our students will gain so much experience with increased opportunities to practice clinical skills.”

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.