

# The use of medical students to enhance inpatient contact tracing during the COVID-19 pandemic

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## Introduction

The centralised NHS 'Test and Trace' contact tracing service set up in England to control the COVID-19 pandemic was widely criticised for its lack of effectiveness due to several shortcomings including difficulty matching supply to demand. This led to the establishment of local initiatives within England to try to improve reach into the community.<sup>1</sup> This paper aims to provide insight into how a collaborative effort between the Sheffield City Council, a community-led group of volunteers – the Sheffield Community Contact Tracers (SCCT) – and an inpatient healthcare professional contact tracing team based in a hospital infectious diseases department (IPCT), utilised medical students to assist with contact tracing, while providing them with valuable experience.

## Methods

SCCT and IPCT recruited four third-year medical students on a month-long elective in late 2021 to assist with inpatient contact tracing. After a period of training by the IPCT, the students conducted face-to-face interviews with inpatients diagnosed with COVID-19. During these interviews, the students collected relevant demographic and medical data, which was subsequently analysed and interpreted. The students also spent time in the communities most impacted by COVID-19 to gain insight into how social inequalities can affect health.

## Discussion

There has been minimal use of medical students in aiding of the contact tracing process in the UK. Similarly, inpatient contact tracing initiatives for COVID-19 in acute NHS hospital trusts in the UK were almost non-existent throughout the pandemic. The SCCT and IPCT at Sheffield Teaching Hospitals (STH) pioneered the use of medical students through face-to-face interviews with hospital inpatients.<sup>2</sup>

## Conclusion

Medical students possess relevant clinical skills and knowledge, such as infectious disease control, which can reduce the training time required to contact trace for communicable diseases, in this case specifically for COVID-19.

Clinical placements for medical students were limited at the beginning of the pandemic. The provision of contact tracing roles to medical students can provide innovative ways of learning.

The utilisation of medical students during their clinical placement to aid in contract tracing can help match supply to demand and allows them to play a much-needed role in the global fight against COVID-19, future pandemics, and public health crises. ■

## References

- 1 NHS Test and Trace service to strengthen regional contact tracing. 2020 [cited 27 July 2022]. [www.gov.uk/government/news/nhs-test-and-trace-service-to-strengthen-regional-contact-tracing](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/nhs-test-and-trace-service-to-strengthen-regional-contact-tracing)
- 2 Foster R, Jones B, Carey I *et al*. The successful use of volunteers to enhance NHS Test and Trace contact tracing of in-patients with Covid-19: a pilot study. *J Infect Dis Ther* 2021;9:457.

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