

Letters to the Editor

OVERVIEW

Please submit letters for the editor's consideration within 3 weeks of receipt of *Future Healthcare Journal*. Letters should be limited to 350 words, and sent by email to: fhj@rcp.ac.uk

Lessons learnt from medical students' experiences of volunteering in the NHS during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Editor – The COVID-19 pandemic pushed the NHS to near-breaking point. Faced with the significantly increased workload, many hospital trusts across the UK decided to start a partnership with their affiliated medical school to allow medical students to volunteer in designated roles within the NHS.¹ We conducted a retrospective electronic survey of second- and third-year students at a UK graduate entry medical school (Warwick Medical School) who had volunteered in the NHS during the first peak. The survey was conducted over a 3-week period in July 2020 and focused on the training received, experiences gained and perceived future value of the volunteering.

Of the 235 responses received in total (66% response rate), 147 students had volunteered to work for the NHS. The majority (80%) undertook the role of healthcare assistant on the wards or in the intensive care unit. The anxiety levels of students before commencing the first shift were high, with a median score of 6 (interquartile range 3–8) on a scale of 0–10. Their feelings were most frequently described as 'nervous', followed by 'excited' and 'apprehensive' (Fig 1). Over half of the students felt that the learning opportunities were relevant to their curriculum, with clinical skills, communication skills and team working being the most widely reported. Only a minority reported negative experiences, such as being discouraged from performing clinical tasks. Overall, most students (74%) felt their experiences during the pandemic would benefit their future training, and almost all (94%) would choose to volunteer again if needed.

Our study has demonstrated that medical students found volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic a positive experience, enabling them to acquire skills that would likely be useful for the rest of their training. To improve their experiences of working in a pandemic, they should be encouraged to seek out learning opportunities, where possible, and ensure that training is tailored to their clinical role, in addition to providing them with pastoral support and resources focused on mental wellbeing.² By giving them the right foundation to learn and thrive, we can

anticipation
 apprehensive calm cautious concerned
 confident COVID curious dependant eager energetic
 enthusiastic excited forgotten frightening
 grateful help hesitant hopeful interested
 intimidated intrigued keen motivated nervous
 open-minded optimistic overwhelmed pleased PPE prepared proud
 ready relieved scared slightly stressed tired
 uncertain underprepared uneducated unnerved
 unprepared unsure useful wanting ward working
 worried

Fig 1. The most common words used to describe how the students felt just before starting their first shift. PPE = personal protective equipment.

ensure that medical students can continue to be an invaluable asset to the NHS if we are faced with another pandemic. ■

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