

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on dermatology departments' support of medical students: A survey study

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To the Editor:

The COVID-19 pandemic has mandated urgent modifications to the medical school curriculum to ensure medical students continue to receive adequate education, and preparation for application to residency. Since the start of the pandemic, some opportunities have been made available for medical students interested in dermatology, including participation in virtual didactics and grand rounds [1], virtual patient visits [2], and use of online learning tools including the American Academy of Dermatology's online curriculum, VisualDx, and the New England Journal of Medicine's photo challenge [1,2]. However, there is question if these measures have been adequate.

We conducted a survey study to determine if dermatology programs have held fewer application-focused and education-focused sessions for medical students. We also assessed measures that dermatology departments have started or ceased to support students since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. After approval from the Institutional Review Board at the Wake Forest School of Medicine, a link to a voluntary, anonymous, REDCap-generated survey was emailed to members of the Association of Professors of Dermatology (APD)—dermatology program chairs, program directors, clerkship directors, and other faculty members across the United States. Participants answered multiple-choice and free response questions.

In all, 18 of 170 (11%) APD members completed the survey. A total of 16 (89%) respondents reported holding application-focused sessions for medical students since the COVID-19 pandemic. Of these responses, seven (44%) reported no change in session number when compared to pre-pandemic, whereas seven (44%) reported an increase in session number. No respondents reported a decrease in session number. A total of 11 (61%) respondents reported holding education-focused sessions for students since the pandemic ([Table 1](#)). Of these, four (36%) reported no change in session number when compared to pre-pandemic, whereas seven (64%) reported an increase in session number. No respondents reported a decrease in session number.

A total of two (11%) programs reported offering extra in-person dermatology rotations for home medical students for the 2020-2021 academic year; six (33%) programs reported offering virtual dermatology clinical rotations for visiting, away students; and five (28%) programs reported offering virtual dermatology research rotations for away students. Approximately half of programs (10, 56%) reported allowing students to participate in telemedicine visits, including virtual visits (synchronous, provider-to-patient), virtual consults (synchronous, provider-to-provider), eVisits (asynchronous, provider-to-patient), and eConsults (asynchronous, provider-to-provider). Nine programs (50%) reported stopping specific learning activities for students since the COVID-19 pandemic ([Table 1](#)). A major limitation of the survey includes small sample size.

Overall, despite concerns the pandemic's burden may have shifted attention away from medical students and medical education, most programs maintained or even increased their number of application-focused and education-focused sessions. In addition, some programs offered extra clinical rotations for home students, virtual clinical and research rotations for away students, and opportunities for students to participate in telemedicine visits. Other specialties, such as pathology, have noted success with these virtual courses [3]. These novel interventions—such as access to more virtual learning and research opportunities, and exploring more programs—may hold benefit even beyond the pandemic, something dermatology programs could consider as a means to better support their students.

References

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Potential conflicts of interest

Dr. Steven Feldman has received research, speaking and/or consulting support from Abbvie, Advance Medical, Almirall, Alvotech, Arena, BMS, Boehringer Ingelheim, Caremark, Celgene, Forte, Galderma, GSK/Stiefel, Helsinn, Informa, Janssen, Leo Pharma, Lilly, Menlo, Merck, Mylan, National Biological Corporation, National Psoriasis Foundation, Novan, Novartis, Ortho Dermatology, Pfizer, Qurient, Regeneron, Samsung, Sanofi, Sun Pharma, Suncare Research and UpToDate. He consults for others through Guidepoint Global, Gerson Lehrman and other consulting organizations. He is founder and majority owner of www.DrScore.com. He is founder and part owner of Causa Research, a company dedicated to enhancing patients' adherence to treatment. The remaining authors have no conflicts to disclose.

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Table 1. The impact of COVID-19 on dermatology departments' support of medical students: survey responses.

Did your dermatology department cancel dermatology clinical rotations for medical students during the COVID-19 pandemic?		
	Number of Programs	Percentage of Programs
Yes	16	89
No	2	11
For how long were dermatology rotations canceled?		
	Number of Programs	Percentage of Programs
<1 month	0	0
1-2 months	2	13
2-3 months	7	44
3-4 months	4	25
>4 months	3	19
Not sure	0	0
Have dermatology clinical rotations since resumed?		
	Number of Programs	Percentage of Programs
Yes	15	94
No	1	6
Has your dermatology department held sessions related to preparing for/ applying to dermatology residency for medical students during the COVID-19 pandemic?		
	Number of Programs	Percentage of Programs
Yes	16	89
No	1	6
Not sure	1	6
Is your department holding more or fewer sessions related to preparing for/ applying to dermatology compared to years prior to the pandemic?		
	Number of Programs	Percentage of Programs
Holding more sessions	7	44
Holding fewer sessions	0	0
Session number has not changed	7	44
Not sure	2	13
Has your dermatology department held sessions related to learning dermatology material for medical students since the COVID-19 pandemic?		
	Number of Programs	Percentage of Programs
Yes	11	61
No	5	28
Not sure	2	11
What is the nature of these learning sessions?		
	Number of Programs	Percentage of Programs
Lectures	9	82
Grand Rounds	8	73
Kodachrome sessions	9	82
Histopathology sessions	5	46
Journal club	6	55
Other* *included dermatopathology on YouTube, Kodachromes on the AAD website, and virtual two-week case sessions	2	18
Not sure	0	0
Is your department holding more or fewer sessions related to learning dermatology material compared to years prior to the pandemic?		
	Number of Programs	Percentage of Programs

More sessions	7	44
Fewer sessions	0	0
Session number has not changed	4	36
Not sure	0	0
Is your dermatology department offering extra dermatology in-person home rotations for medical students for the 2020-2021 academic year?		
	Number of Programs	Percentage of Programs
Yes	2	11
No	16	89
Is your dermatology department offering virtual dermatology clinical rotations for visiting medical students for the 2020-2021 academic year?		
	Number of Programs	Percentage of Programs
Yes	6	33
No	12	67
Is your dermatology department offering virtual dermatology research rotations for visiting medical students for the 2020-2021 academic year?		
	Number of Programs	Percentage of Programs
Yes	5	28
No	13	72
Has your dermatology department allowed medical students to participate in telemedicine visits, such as virtual visits (synchronous, provider-to-patient), virtual consults (synchronous, provider-to-provider), eVisits (asynchronous, provider-to-patient) eConsults (asynchronous, provider-to-provider)?		
	Number of Programs	Percentage of Programs
Virtual Visits	10	56
Virtual Consults	6	33
eVisits	2	11
eConsults	2	11
No Telemedicine Participation	6	33
Not Sure	1	6
What resources or reading material has your dermatology department recommended for medical students to use to improve their dermatology knowledge?		
	Number of Programs	Percentage of Programs
AAD Modules	16	89
Textbooks	14	78
Podcasts	5	28
Other* *included VisualDx, live session with program director, YouTube dermatopathology modules, virtual dermatopathology sign-outs, and journal articles (JAAD/JAMA Dermatology)	4	22
Not Sure	1	6
Has your dermatology department changed its recommendations on resources for medical students to use to improve their dermatology knowledge since the COVID-19 pandemic?		
	Number of Programs	Percentage of Programs
Yes	1	6
No	16	89
Not Sure	1	6
Has your dermatology department ceased any activities for medical students since the COVID-19 pandemic?		
	Number of Programs	Percentage of Programs
Lectures	1	11
Grand Rounds	1	11
Kodachrome sessions	1	11

Histopathology sessions	3	33
Journal club	0	0
Other* *included meal-time meetings	1	11
Not sure	4	44