

Phenomenological Study of Post-Graduate Trainees' Experiences with Mental Health Well-Being during COVID-19 Pandemic

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

This is the report of a phenomenological study of post-graduate trainees' experiences relating to well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was conducted between December 2021 and February 2023 by the Office of Professional and Educational Development (OPED), Faculty of Medicine, Memorial University. The Workplace Health, Safety and Compensation Commission (WorkplaceNL) provided funding in support of this study.

The research objectives were to:

1. Identify and describe the perceptions, experiences, and challenges of postgraduate trainees in meeting work and training commitments during the COVID-19 pandemic,
2. Identify coping mechanisms and supports available to and utilized by postgraduate trainees during the pandemic, and
3. Uncover opportunities for enhancing support systems for postgraduate trainees in coping with psychological, emotional, and social stressors and challenges during times of public health emergency.

The study was undertaken by collecting information and data using the following methods:

- A literature review comprised of peer-reviewed journal articles published between March 2020 – June 2022, and
- Resident interviews with N= 8 residents spanning a variety of programs, and academic years.

Key Findings

The COVID-19 pandemic has created high levels of concern and stress around the world. COVID-19 has threatened not only the physical health, but also the psychological, emotional and social health of healthcare workers (HCWs). Sources of distress amongst HCWs during the pandemic may include feelings of vulnerability or loss of control and concerns about their own health, spread of the virus, the health of family and friends, changes in work, and being isolated.

Postgraduate trainees (or “residents”) performed an important clinical service in the Canadian healthcare system in the provision of front-line clinical care throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Postgraduate trainees are medical doctors who have graduated from medical

school, Canadian or international, and have commenced the vocational aspect of their training pathway. Trainees are among the most vulnerable HCWs.

Mental health and well-being is an important workplace safety consideration. The pandemic has expounded the stressors placed on postgraduate medical trainees. The combined pressure and stress of training and working during a pandemic have introduced different and unique forms of psychological and emotional stressors for these individuals.

Throughout the literature, the mobilization of postgraduate trainees to high demand departments and thus a high likelihood of encountering suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19 was a prevalent concern identified by postgraduate trainees during the pandemic. During the pandemic, trainees were impacted by being redeployed, having to transition to virtual learning, and experiencing rotations that were modified, moved, or suspended. The COVID-19 outbreak has also led to an increase in prevalence of depression and anxiety among postgraduate trainees (Irman et al., 2020).

Recommendations in the literature include implementing special interventions to promote mental health and well-being in HCWs working during public health emergencies such as the pandemic. Information needs to be provided in a timely and correct way to such providers. It has also been recommended that there be special efforts to promote the psychological well-being of postgraduate trainees by providing expanded psychological support systems that acknowledge the additional stress related to COVID-19 in relation to their already challenging residency training. Leaders should also facilitate close communication and regular evaluation of trainees' needs.

Following multiple rounds of deductive and inductive coding, thematic analysis of resident interviews revealed a variety of insights relating to:

- Trainee experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, including:
 - Changes in the nature, volume, and scope of work,
 - Changes in work-life balance,
 - Limited learning experiences, and
 - Lack of group cohesion.
- Adjustment and adaptation to changes.
- Positive impacts on trainees' future learning and career, including:
 - Emotional intelligence,
 - Improved culture of trainee health and safety,
 - More experience, exposure, and skill, and

- Importance of virtual technology.
- Negative impacts on trainees' future experiences.
- Recommended supports.

The shift from in-person to virtual education and training and the public health measures implemented in response to the pandemic caused a lack of group cohesion and few opportunities to engage in team building activities. Residents also missed out on vital learning opportunities, including live or direct teaching and learning, training rotations and opportunities to learn from other residents and staff. Residents were aware of the need to acquire specific competencies in order to advance in their training and subsequent career, and were thus concerned about how such limited learning opportunities and exposure would impact their ability to reach typical milestones and benchmarks in the future.

Residents sought support from their family physician, used contracted leave or sick days, debriefed with staff, and engaged in a variety of self-care and self-learning activities to support their mental health and well-being during this time. Despite this, residents described feeling isolated from and unable to access usual supports, such as family and friends who were often not located within their region or province of study.

The rapid and unprecedented changes to their education and training programs also led to several positive changes in resident educational and personal development. An increase in self-directed learning skills was noted, with residents reporting a greater sense of ownership and leadership in their own education. Virtual learning also reportedly improved their learning, increased engagement and attendance, and enabled regular meetings and academic half days when usual in-person learning was not available. Residents reported increased confidence and experience with virtual care, as they realized the importance of virtual care delivery within the Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) healthcare system. A shift in the culture surrounding resident health and safety was also reported, as residents noted that there was a move away from traditional work-life culture to more acceptance of others taking time off and the importance of personal health and safety. Additionally, residents reported increased emotional intelligence (self-awareness, empathy, compassion) which may enhance learning and delivery of patient-centered care.

Resident interview findings suggest that additional supports may need to be provided to those without access to appropriate and preferred sources of support during a healthcare crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Results highlight the importance of exploring and maintaining awareness of the background of trainees and focusing on team building to improve comradery within and between disciplines and professions as public health measures are lifted and work

and social routines return to normal. Additional suggestions include administrative recommendations for program and systemic change, such as providing protected time for social events, implementing mandatory wellness check-ins, allowing more flexibility and access to leave options and time off, considering remuneration for additional duties, such as vaccine administration, improving clarity regarding the essential role of residents during the pandemic, and increasing the number of residents.

References

Imran, N., Masood, H. M. U., Ayub, M., & Gondal, K. M. (2020). Psychological impact of COVID-19 pandemic on postgraduate trainees: a cross-sectional survey. *Postgraduate Medical Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1136/postgradmedj-2020-138364>