



European Medical Students' Association

Association Européenne des Étudiants en Médecine

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Pandemic Preparedness and Mobilization of Medical Students

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The European Medical Students' Association (EMSA) represents medical students across Europe. We envision a healthy and solidary Europe in which medical students actively promote health. EMSA empowers medical students to advocate health in all policies, excellence in medical research, interprofessional healthcare education and the protection of human rights across Europe.

Problem Statement

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the many problems and shortcomings of the health systems responding to it. The World Directory currently includes more than 2,800 medical schools around the globe (1) and student groups within some of those have organized their own efforts to help to respond to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic (2, 3). However, many medical schools had doubts about the possible role of medical students in responding to this pandemic, revealing concerns about their preparedness to help. This is possibly due to the fact that, normally, students are introduced to the healthcare setting in a controlled manner and in a stable learning environment, which does not guarantee the confidence and skills necessary to correctly function during a health crisis (4). For responses to future health crises to be successful and organized, pandemic preparedness teaching in medical schools will need to be implemented. More specific and practical policies and protocols on the mobilization of medical students in health crises, including but not limited to the clinical context, can also be key to clarify the role of students during health crises and to allow a safer response.

Our View. Aim.

EMSA intends to empower medical students to take an active role in responding to and tackling the challenges faced by European healthcare systems and has organized its efforts around raising awareness about these problems. The COVID-19 pandemic posed considerable challenges to European health systems and revealed important gaps in the training of medical students, which prevented many from taking an active role in responding to the pandemic. EMSA believes that if there was adequate training to enable students to intervene in the context of a health crisis and clear protocols on their role, their help could have been better used. This observation is supported by evidence that suggests the effectiveness of training programs in this area (5) and reflections that resulted from previous health crises (6). Students and recent graduates can strengthen the response to the pandemic in the clinical setting but also in other contexts, such as in case tracing and information collection on transmission chains (7), key worker support (8) and patient monitoring and screening through telehealth tools (9). In addition, EMSA would like to emphasize the need for general regulations concerning the working conditions of students during the crisis. These rules should cover working hours, salary and insurance. Despite the risks, some evidence also suggests positive effects for students, such as the reinforcement of important values, such as altruism, solidarity and service in times of crisis (10, 11). Most importantly, medical students can contribute to the resilience of health systems, so efforts must be made to better define their role and to prepare them for future health crises.

Recommendations

EMSA calls upon the European Commission to:

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- Discuss and support Member States to implement policies and best practices regarding pandemic preparedness that is inclusive of medical students;
- Monitor and report on different national organizational strategies around optimizing the response to pandemics or other public health emergencies and their outcomes.

EMSA calls upon the Member States to:

- Organize and finance training programs in crisis management and disaster preparedness for medical students and interns;
- Identify where their healthcare response efforts were lacking the most during the COVID-19 pandemic and make efforts to strengthen the response in these areas;
- Develop and implement guidelines that include the roles of medical students and interns in responding to the challenges posed by a public health crisis;
- Ensure that medical students and interns involved in responding to a health crisis have access to personal protective equipment, to the same extent as health professionals.

EMSA calls upon the Faculties of Medicine and Health Science to:

- Assess training needs in pandemic preparedness;
- Ensure that students and training physicians are being taught the necessary skills of working as healthcare professionals during a pandemic, including but not limited to: health authorities and their responsibilities during a health crisis, personal protective equipment use and following basic sanitation procedures, patient safety, teamwork and communication;
- Connect physicians involved in the healthcare response to the COVID-19 pandemic with their medical students in ways that include but are not limited to workshops and interactive lectures;
- Emphasize the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to the challenges posed by the pandemic;
- Set up a system of communication and information collection on volunteers in order to respond faster when help is needed.

EMSA calls upon the EMSA Members and the ESMA European Board to:

- Continue to spread awareness about the need for optimized policies in response to a pandemic;
- Share ways to get involved in the different responses that public health crises like the COVID-19 pandemic demand;
- Promote the dissemination of evidence based information on the scientific developments during the pandemic.

EMSA calls upon medical students to:

- Look for and participate in local initiatives that help strengthen the capacity of health systems to respond to health crises;

- Look for and attend training programs that enable them to intervene in the context of a health crisis;
- Publish articles on student initiatives developed during health crises, their outcomes, limitations and recommendations for the future.

EMSA commits itself to:

- Continue to raise awareness on the importance of pandemic preparedness and medical students' role being explicit during the process
- Empower medical students to obtain the necessary skills of pandemic preparedness;
- Advocate for the implementation of pandemic preparedness and crisis management/training programs of different forms.

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