COVID-19 Pandemic and its Impact on the Pharmacy Education

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Main Manuscript
Dear Editor,
The sudden occurrence of COVID-19 reached a state of pandemic soon after its global spread-out in the early spring of the year 2020. This immediately followed shut down and practice of social distancing, all across the world. In this new-fangled situation, all sorts of activities, embracing the day to day work and employment, faced interruption in the worst possible way, unlike before. Lockdown turned into the biggest and unforeseen challenge of the year 2020, for all and in particular for the management and administration of workplaces and educational institutes. To ensure a means of earning and to evade delayed degrees, immediate policies and strategies were brought in demand. This was mandatory following the government announced that the education must be continued without any intrusion. Under such circumstances, digital learning popped up and was adopted by all institutes across the globe; to ensure the coaching of the students. This brought forth a sudden shift from traditional campus classes to e-classes. On one hand, where students were kept busy and saved any delay, on the other hand, it initiated a panic amongst the teachers, students, and their families. However, within a short time, teachers across the globe were virtually on screen, delivering lectures while students participated across the screen.1

In addition to this, a couple of scientific meetings, workshops and educational conferences pre-scheduled were delayed or canceled, considering the shutdown of universities and private halls. Gathering was also depreciated with people allowed to interact, only at a safe distance of 6 feet’s intensifying hindrance in the exchange of knowledge and information. Keeping the severity of the situation in mind, some essential shifts were need of the hour and the way forward to combat interruptions. Many organizers successfully switched to virtual events, managing to conduct the event on the same date, transmitting due information in a timely fashion without any added delay and welcoming a larger community. However, the other side of the picture hides some limitations besides the above-mentioned tools and technologies, lending help in the crisis. Besides the support rendered, unobstructed network access, online interruptions, voice modulations, remained some of the technical flaws, other than the failure of emotional connect and real-time simulation still being in question.2

It is important to note, that our current concerns and observations comes from online sessions conducted with students of Doctor of Pharmacy (Pharm-D), a professional degree instituted on a multidisciplinary curriculum. This course of study entails a series of theoretical sessions,
combined with practical demonstrations and performances. The respective regulating council binds pharmacy aspirants to reach outfield like hospitals, clinics, industries and gain real-time to strengthen understanding and bring their skills in practice. In compliance with the same, pharmacy students undergo regular lab work, adopts internships, graded field visits; back to back during the five-year span of degree.  

Besides the scientific and clinical core of the profession, hands-on clinical experience, as well as onsite experimental learning in clinical settings, was impeded. Thus, the very first challenge dealt with post suspension of on campus classes were the adjustment of curricula according to the current needs and choices available. Various platforms were brought in use including as many as Learning Management System (LMS), Google Meet, and Zoom, etc. as conventional skype and Viber failed to cope up with the existing crises. Many senior teachers and non-technical people in the field of pharmacy met this as a challenge yet successfully adapted to change. The situation was no different from students, yet many were quick in learning but one’s coming from remote and rural areas were shoved with inadequate facilities of the internet and computers. Hence, a solution was provided via the provision of recorded lectures followed with open book tests and quizzes to establish a sound feedback system.  

The effect of the pandemic on students from a field of health like, Pharm-D pupils manifested grave consequences owing to odds, comprising of clinical rotation, laboratory demonstrations, industrial internships, and other clerkships included. Keeping this in mind, it was important to provide a suitable alternative and cater practical needs of this professional degree as role of pharmacists in community and hospital settings is critical in a health care system. In response to this, e-learning strategy well covered practical needs of the scientific curriculum, and simulation for laboratory settings were thoroughly prepared and up taken at whatever level possible to confirm the delivery of practical skills. The closure of institutes, where at one hand couldn’t impede lecture, at the same time, the examination was also carried with some seriousness at least, post completion of a topic or semester yet failed uniformity across boards. While many competitive exams along with board exams were canceled on national and international levels and scholarships withheld or abandoned altogether. Having mentioned the issues and proposed solutions, the graduates turning out to be professional this year shall face consequences of COVID-19 pandemic. Besides educational interruptions they faced, they shall be interviewed on strict grounds to assess knowledge only if graduates bypass the residual effect like a major global recession.  

To conclude, COVID-19 where acutely disturbed all learning the process has also raised a concern regarding the pharmacy education and other fields in general. Students from different field have different needs, yet for pharmacy student, practical knowledge is equally essential as theoretical. Besides all efforts made, a major gap still remains demanding some initiative or policy to provide pharmacy students with hands-on clinical training, industrial exposure, hospitals rounds and retail residencies to stir the required level of confidence before walking into professional life.

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