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Mini-biography: I am a part of the Australian Medical Students Association (AMSA) Journal of Global Health and Medical Students’ Aid Project, a global health group at UNSW. I also volunteer for Phil’ at UNSW, where we aim to raise funds for the Child Life and Music Therapy Program at Sydney Children’s Hospital. Previously, I have worked as a freelance writer for Teen Inc. of Ceylon Today, an English newspaper in Sri Lanka. My interests include advocating for equity in medicine, raising awareness about issues relating to global health and writing.

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Summary of article: An expression piece on the personal impact of COVID-19 on my travel home (to Sri Lanka), personal life, studies and clinical placement.

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How COVID-19 has changed my medical experience

February 2020: Although I had heard of the “novel coronavirus” and the devastation it was blazing in Wuhan, thoughts of a global pandemic were far from my mind as I slowly got accustomed to life as a first-year medical student in sunny Sydney.

It soon became clear, however, that my first-year university experience would not at all be what I expected. As February progressed, the “novel coronavirus” had become “COVID-19” and was spreading rapidly around the world [1]. Shortly after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, the virus infiltrated New South Wales with the docking of the infected Ruby Princess cruise ship in Sydney [2]. By late March, my university had announced that all lectures, practical classes, and examinations would be moving online to contain the spread of the virus, with no clear dates in place for a return to campus. As an international student, this left me free to fly back home to Sri Lanka and continue online learning. However, Sri Lanka’s tough approach to tackling COVID-19 included the imposition of curfews and a nationwide lockdown starting March 20 [3]. Additionally, the Sri Lankan army had built 45 quarantine centres in the country by March 23 and all citizens arriving from abroad were to be detained in these centres for a period of 14 days [4]. Therefore, I eventually decided to remain in Sydney, unwilling to rely on the limited internet facilities likely to be available in these quarantine camps to complete my end-of-term exam coming up in early April.

In Australia, COVID-19’s contagious nature meant major changes to my newly established lifestyle. I rejected the archetype of a messy university student and spent hours disinfecting every fruit, vegetable, and juice carton I bought from the supermarket before placing them in the fridge. I no longer had any physical contact with the new friends I had just started to get to know and had to opt instead to join their Zoom parties. To do my part in flattening the curve, I chose not to eat out anymore and followed Zumba tutorials online in lieu of exercising at the gym.

Like my personal life, my academic life had changed tremendously. All our lectures and group classes were, by now, being delivered online either live or via recordings. The biggest change I had to get used to, however, was the switch from on-campus practical sessions to our new online practical classes. These newly designed practical classes involved watching videos of faculty professors carrying out experiments in the lab or pointing out important anatomical features on a cadaver prior to the class, followed by a live online ‘Q&A’ to clarify any questions arising from these video recordings. A major impediment of these classes is that we do not have the opportunity to practice experiments first-hand or use laboratory equipment. This makes a lot of the practical content understandably confusing for a first-year medical student like me and renders the idea of an end-of-year practical exam incredibly daunting. Even worse still is the fact that all first-year hospital placements were cancelled, although we continue to have ‘Clinical Skills Sessions’ online where we elicit histories from a tutor who takes on the persona of a patient. Validating my concerns, research has suggested that COVID-19 could have a detrimental impact on a medical student’s exam performance and competency as a junior doctor due to the fact that several medical schools, like mine, have cancelled or delayed hospital rotations to quash the risk of students becoming vectors for COVID-19 [5].
In spite of my worries about falling behind, it is undeniable that COVID-19 has presented us medical students with a unique learning experience. Having had the opportunity to meet with simulated patients online as part of my university’s online clinical sessions, I have gained glimpses into telemedicine. Telemedicine is referred to as a “21st century approach to medicine” as it allows patients to communicate with physicians 24/7 and provide detailed descriptions of their travel histories [6]. A key advantage of advanced telemedicine systems is their use of automated screening algorithms and local epidemiological information that are applied to standardise screening and practice techniques across healthcare providers [6]. Learning how to conduct consultations online has armed me with a modern set of skills that I am confident will be an asset in the future. By pushing medical schools to employ new and innovative teaching strategies, COVID-19 has unwittingly given me the opportunity to experience a fresh facet of medical education.

Conflicts of Interest
None

Authors Contribution
Written by Pabasha Nanayakkara

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References


