The value of mentoring and the ASMS-NZMSA Mentoring Programme

Josephine Stonyer

The wellbeing of medical students is a pressing issue both within New Zealand and globally. The journey through medical school is unique, filled with new experiences, opportunities, learning, challenges, and insights; concurrently, however, there are a variety of stressors and pressures that can negatively impact student wellbeing. With increasing awareness, strategies are being implemented to tackle this issue. This article will explore common stressors experienced by medical students and the impact of these stressors; the value of mentoring as one avenue to improve student wellbeing; and introduce the exciting Association of Salaried Medical Specialists (ASMS) and New Zealand Medical Students' Association (NZMSA) Mentoring Programme, launched in 2019 throughout New Zealand.

The informal NZMSA Report on the NZMSA Wellbeing Survey 2018 identified demanding academic workload, financial hardship, and long hospital hours as the most significant factors that impacted wellbeing among surveyed New Zealand medical students. Other factors included challenges of the clinical environment – for example, bullying, discrimination, and emotionally or ethically challenging situations; medical school factors such as a lack of support and the negative impacts of a dominant social culture; and personal and life stressors including illness and family crises. Wider literature supports these findings, and also identified the pressure to meet the high expectations placed on medical students by themselves, their family and friends, or the medical school as a noteworthy negative influence on student wellbeing.

Furthermore, a lack of support for students can exacerbate these stressors. Social support structures may be impeded due to frequent rotation through clinical placements. This can, for example, limit continuity of collegial support, and isolate students, geographically or otherwise, from family and friends. Students may also experience barriers to seeking treatment, including: stigma surrounding mental health; concern that issues raised may jeopardise clinical placements; barriers to seeking treatment, including: stigma surrounding mental health; and poor accessibility, availability, and affordability of services.

It is therefore not surprising that a growing body of literature depicts a concerning state of mental health and wellbeing among medical students. Students often describe feelings of isolation, unrelenting stress and pressure, exhaustion, inadequacy, self-doubt, and uncertainty. A comprehensive meta-analysis estimated that globally, nearly one-third of medical students experience depression. The Australian National Mental Health Survey of Doctors and Medical Students found medical students had nearly three times higher rates of very high psychological distress compared to the general population: 92% compared to 31%. Moreover, 52.3% of medical students surveyed experienced burnout, characterised by emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and low personal accomplishment. One in five students (20%) had experienced suicidal thoughts in the past 12 months. Mental health was typically worse among females, indigenous medical students, and those on remote clinical placements. Once again, other studies support these findings and have also cited higher rates of anxiety and substance abuse, poorer physical health, and poorer quality of life among medical students. Finally, it is also important to highlight the wider impact of poor mental health and wellbeing among medical students. This has been linked to, for example, impaired academic performance, professionalism, and social relationships; and reduced compassion, empathy, and patient care.

Given this, urgent action is needed to improve medical student wellbeing. Advocates strongly endorse a multifaceted approach across multiple levels of medical education. This can include, for example, student support programmes like mentoring or peer support, university and clinical site student support initiatives, and medical education curriculum changes.

Mentoring is regarded as a key strategy that has a valuable role in improving medical student wellbeing. A widely accepted definition of mentoring can be drawn from the report by the Standing Committee on Postgraduate Medical and Dental Education (SCOPME). This defines mentoring as:

>a process whereby an experienced, highly regarded, empathetic person (the mentor) guides another (usually younger) individual (the mentee) in the development and re-examination of their own ideas, learning, and personal and professional development. The mentor, who often (but not necessarily) works in the same organisation or field as the mentee, achieves this by listening or talking in confidence to the mentee.

Historically, mentoring programmes have aimed to provide students with a source of career advice and guidance, and an opportunity for professional networking. With the rising awareness and concern for student wellbeing, however, more recently established mentoring programmes have been focussed on improving student wellbeing. In brief, by providing an avenue of support, mentoring can simultaneously reduce isolation that students may experience, and provide students with a space to process and discuss challenges and stressors, ultimately improving wellbeing.

Mentoring can exist in many forms: peer to peer, doctor to student, in groups, one on one, in person, online, and for varying lengths of time. Mentoring programmes may be targeted to specific groups, for example: Māori, rural, female, or LGBTQI+ students, who often face additional stressors and therefore may experience poorer wellbeing. While every mentoring structure has both benefits and challenges, this article will focus on one on one, doctor to student mentoring to foster student wellbeing.

One example of a successful mentoring programme that had significant positive impact on student wellbeing was run at the Karolinska Institutet. Medical students in their first year of clinical placements were paired with physicians at Södersjukhuset, a large teaching hospital...
Develop and foster wellbeing and resilience, not career coaching or support for isolation and confusion for medical students throughout their career.

Empower medical students through having access to mentors who are further ahead in their career sharing their own experiences and providing support and guidance. Mentors also provided continuity of support throughout frequent change in clinical rotations. These factors provide students with a sense of security and support in their transition to the clinical environment; reduced feelings of isolation; and increased optimism and motivation. Additionally, students greatly valued their mentor being separate from their clinical team, enabling them to be more honest and open without concern for conflicts of interest.

This programme highlights the benefit to student wellbeing that can be accrued through mentoring. Mentoring connects students with an ongoing source of support, enabling them to discuss challenges or stressors they face, and seek advice. Critically, this means issues and concerns can be managed at the time, preventing their accumulation and development into larger issues that impact on wellbeing.

Sfenfor-Hayes and colleagues also found mentors attained value through involvement in this mentoring programme. Mentors most commonly described their experience as rewarding, inspiring, and enjoyable. They valued the opportunity to increase their understanding of students’ perspectives and experiences in the clinical environment; some mentors even reported changing their own clinical behaviour as a result. Mentoring also encouraged them to reflect on their teaching, along with challenging issues in medicine like ethical dilemmas and gender equity. Overall, 74% of mentors reported personal development, and 50% professional development, through involvement in the programme. Mentoring relies on generosity and commitment from mentors; therefore the positive evaluation by mentors of their gain from involvement is encouraging.

Recognising the potential benefits of mentoring, NZMSA, in partnership with the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists (ASMS), launched the ASMS-NZMSA Mentoring Programme in July 2019, which is summarised in Figure 1. Fourth-year students were matched in one on one mentoring partnerships with Senior Medical Officers (SMOs). The programme has a focus on medical student wellbeing at its core, with four key aims to:

- Develop and foster wellbeing and resilience, not career coaching or specialty-specific advice
- Reduce isolation and confusion for medical students throughout their medical training
- Empower medical students through having access to mentors who can provide wisdom and advice
- Upskill clinicians in communication and mentoring

In the inaugural year of the programme, 127 student-SMO pairs were matched across New Zealand (unpublished data, ASMS-NZMSA Mentoring Programme, 2019). Over 200 SMOs expressed interest in mentoring, a testament to the desire and willingness of senior doctors to support and guide medical students (unpublished data, ASMS-NZMSA Mentoring Programme, 2019). All participants self-nominated their interest in the programme, and had the option of in person or online mentoring. The majority of students (68.5%) opted for in person meetings; the remainder had no preference or preferred online meetings (unpublished data, ASMS-NZMSA Mentoring Programme, 2019). Students from all four clinical schools were engaged in the programme: 54 students from across all six clinical sites of the University of Auckland School of Medicine; 30 students from the University of Otago, Wellington; 25 students from the University of Otago, Christchurch; and 18 students from the Dunedin School of Medicine (unpublished data, ASMS-NZMSA Mentoring Programme, 2019).

NZMSA and ASMS hope that the programme can deliver support and empower students in their development as medical professionals. Feedback from the programme in the inaugural year was encouraging. Hasini Atuluwage, a fourth-year student of the University of Auckland School of Medicine, based in Tauranga, reflected positively on her experience in the ASMS-NZMSA Mentoring Programme, deriving valuable support and insight from her mentor:

"I enjoyed meeting with [my mentor] in a casual setting to talk about my experiences and anything else. I could ask for advice if I wanted to but mostly it was just helpful knowing that I had someone I could talk to about things. She had very similar views to me so we had several discussions about things that I constantly find challenging in the clinical environment, and although her job is not to solve these, it is helpful to gain perspectives from someone who has lived through similar issues.

I also found it an excellent way to gain knowledge of what her life is like as an ED SMO and to create relationships with people in different places when I don’t have connections like this through family or friends (unpublished data, ASMS-NZMSA Mentoring Programme Survey, 2019).

She commented on the importance of minimising conflicts of interest in the mentoring partnership: “I liked that [my SMO] did not have any involvement in my placement as she did not actually work at the hospital I was placed. This meant that I did not have to worry about how this would impact my placement in any way” (unpublished data, ASMS-NZMSA Mentoring Programme Survey, 2019).

Hasini also described how her experience in the programme broke down some barriers in the traditional hierarchy of medicine: “I enjoyed getting to know my SMO as she was quite similar to me, and this really helped me to see SMOs as people that I can be myself around” (unpublished data, ASMS-NZMSA Mentoring Programme Survey, 2019).

The development and launch of this programme, and its success in its first year, is a testament to the hard work and commitment of past NZMSA teams from 2017–2019, and ASMS. Particular acknowledgement is extended to Benjamin Alsop-ten Hove (NZMSA Vice-President External 2019), Charlie Lin (NZMSA Wellbeing Officer 2019), Dr Ajda Arsam (NZMSA Vice-President External 2018), Dr Emma Wilson (NZMSA Wellbeing Officer 2018), and the ASMS team. Sarah Dalton, Dr Jeff Brown, and Dr Annette van Zeest-Jongman. The ASMS-NZMSA Mentoring Programme is entering its second year in 2020, and NZMSA and ASMS aim to continue to strengthen the programme in its ability to support and foster wellbeing among medical students in New Zealand.

In conclusion, efforts to improve medical student wellbeing are a priority. A journey which students enter with passion, hope, and energy can have significant negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing, leading to high levels of distress, depression, suicidality, and burnout among medical students. Mentoring programmes, such as the ASMS-NZMSA Mentoring Programme launched in 2019 throughout New Zealand, are recognised as a valuable strategy to improve student wellbeing. Programmes draw on and enhance the strong collegiality and teamwork inherent in medicine to connect students with an ongoing source of support, and provide a space to discuss challenges or stressors and seek advice. Current evidence demonstrates their success in improving wellbeing among medical students. Ultimately, a resilient, well supported, connected, and empowered student can thrive at medical school, and onward into their career.
ASMS-NZMSA Mentoring Programme

2019 Overview

In 2019, NZMSA (New Zealand Medical Students’ Association) in collaboration with the doctors’ union ASMS (Association of Salaried Medical Specialists) launched a joint mentoring programme that connected 4th year medical students and SMOs across the country.

Aims of this programme:
- To develop and foster wellbeing and resilience, not career coaching or specialty-specific advice
- Reduce isolation and confusion for medical students throughout their medical training
- Empower medical students through having access to mentors who can provide wisdom and advice
- Upskill clinicians in communication and mentoring

127 Successful Matches

- 207 SMOs interested
- 130 students interested
- Students preferring in person meetings: 87/127 (68.5%) 
- Students preferring online meetings or no preference between online/in person meetings: 40/127 (31.5%) 

I enjoyed getting to know my SMO as she was quite similar to me, and this really helped me to see SMOs as people that I can be myself around. I could ask for advice if I wanted to but mostly it was just helpful knowing that I had someone I could talk to about things.

- Student Feedback

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Figure 1. Summary of the ASMS-NZMSA Mentoring Programme
References


About the author

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Conflicts of Interest

Josephine Stonyer is the current NZMSA Wellbeing Officer 2020.