The New Zealand Medical Students’ Association (NZMSA): A year in review 2020

Ellie Baxter

Usually, when writing the annual review of the NZMSA’s year, the president would outline all of the plans for the year and how they have come into fruition. This would typically include the NZMSA Conference and our other events, our advocacy points and focus months, and the results of all our planning and hard work. However with the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic much of this has gone out the window, so this year’s review will look much different to years past.

2020 has been the year of the unexpected, consisting of events that are no doubt for the history books: the Australian bushfires, the aftermath of the Whakaari (White Island) eruption, the coronavirus pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, and it’s only June! This year has brought so much disruption to society, loss of life, and hardship. The whole world has stopped and been given a chance to stand back and appreciate what is important in life, and come together with strong leadership and community action.

For the medical students of Aotearoa, this year was like no other. Pre-clinical students have had to study virtually from afar, removed from the student community and having to adapt to a new way of learning and living. Many clinical students have been kept home from clinical placements, losing valuable experience and exposure to real-life medicine, and with expectations to make this up at a later date. For our Trainee Interns it has been a year of uncertainty; clinical placement has continued under unpredictable circumstances and without overseas electives, as they prepare to enter a disrupted workforce. While this year has been one that no-one could have predicted, it has tried and proven the dedication of students to the field of medicine. I hope that all medical students look back at their perseverance with pride and look forward to their careers with more drive and passion than ever.

In anticipation for this year, NZMSA met to plan our advocacy strategies and initiatives. We identified wellbeing, politics, and workforce as key advocacy points for which we wanted to run focus months. We planned and began to organise our events. Our Clinical Leadership Forum theme was “Attitudes in Advocacy”, which was intended to provide practical advocacy skills as well as inspire students as to what they could achieve. The NZMSA Conference, Unite, was to be held in Christchurch from 5–7 June, which looked to be yet another successful conference that would have brought students from all over the country together for a weekend of great speakers and social events. The Medical Education Summit was to be in May, with plans to open it up and make it more accessible to a wider group of students to encourage further interest in the medical curriculum and education. The Otago University Medical Students’ Association (OUMSA) in Dunedin offered to host the Sports Exchange, giving all cohorts the chance to win the shield back off Christchurch (go, Welly!). We also planned to increase engagement with our members through social media platforms.

By all accounts, it looked to be a great ahead year for NZMSA, and it is a real shame that things did not go our way. I would like to acknowledge this and the hard work that has gone into events and initiatives that weren’t able to come to light. Thank you to the conference team, the Events Officers, and the rest of our team for planning events, initiatives, and focus months that we have not had the time nor opportunity to carry out.

The NZMSA executive are incredibly proud of what we have accomplished despite all the disruption. NZMSA’s mission statement is to unite, represent, and empower the medical students of New Zealand, and this year this has been more important than ever. NZMSA has had to adapt to best support and advocate for students during a turbulent time. COVID-19 has generated a number of unexpected issues and discussions including cancelled overseas electives, virtual classes, alterations to medical curriculums and year length, early Trainee Intern employment, delayed Post-Graduate Year One (PGY1) employment… the list goes on. For each of these issues, NZMSA has voiced student opinions and concerns, and clarified communication. Behind the scenes, there have been many late-night Zoom meetings and persistent emails to achieve what we hope has been a tangible difference for our students.

All of our activity has required collaboration with others and making the most of our connections. Each regional medical students’ association and their executives have been working tirelessly, and we at NZMSA have tried to help coordinate their efforts. We hoped to support them in their work and provide a platform for discussion, cooperation, and idea sharing. Our relationship with Te Oranga has only continued to further add to this.

We’ve worked with the medical school faculties across the country to keep students up to date, clarify communications, and solve issues. Our involvement on the Advanced Choice of Employment (ACE) reference group, our position on the New Zealand Medical Association (NZMA) Doctors-in-Training Council, our student representative on the NZMA board, and our relationships with various other medical organisations has allowed us to voice the medical student perspective on a number of COVID-19-related issues. We have tried to keep students in the loop and give our opinion on bigger picture issues, many of which will affect how the New Zealand health care system recovers from COVID-19.

With regards to events and initiatives, Semester One was not as successful as hoped with many cancellations and postponements. Beyond the Med School Gates was held as an online event for the first time ever. It included speakers from the NZMA, both junior doctors’ unions, the Medical Assurance Society (MAS), the Medical Protection Society (MPS), and ACE; and two newly graduated house officers shared useful information about joining the workforce. This was really well received, and followed by the release of this year’s Guide to Graduation booklet.
The NZMSA and Association of Salaried Medical Specialists (ASMS) mentoring programme is back for a second year running. Initially postponed due to COVID-19, both parties are now looking at rolling this out for 2020. We anticipate this will be well appreciated support for fourth-year medical students, providing them with mentorship and wellbeing-related advice from senior colleagues.

Looking forward to Semester Two and what remains of the year, NZMSA is aiming to bring our events calendar to all students in an altered online format. We want to rebuild our medical student community and provide initiatives that are better than ever. There will be online political panels on medical-related issues and dissemination of information regarding the upcoming election. Our wellbeing month will bring wellbeing events and content to students all over the country. Our annual Medical Education Summit will be held as a webinar with speakers on medical education and adaptability of the curriculum. The NZMA-NZMSA Teaching Awards will need to be presented. There is still much time in the year, and we are excited and hopeful to see what it brings.

I would like to thank you all for your support this year. It has been a trying time, but for our team it has been an absolute privilege to be doing this work and representing New Zealand medical students. We have definitely made lemonade out of lemons and I admire every member of the executive for their persistence and hard work. I wish next year’s executive the best of luck; I am sure that they will do a phenomenal job in the post-COVID-19 era.

About the author

 Ellie Baxter is a sixth-year medical student at University of Otago. Ellie is the 2020 President of NZMSA

Acknowledgement

The rest of the NZMSA executive

Correspondence

Ellie Baxter: president@nzmsa.org.nz