LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Virtual volunteerism: The impetus for connection in the time of COVID-19

Leah Sarah Peer

Dear Editor,

In the wake of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic of cancelled clinical rotations and in-person classes, while medical students felt uncertain and ill-equipped to serve directly on the frontline, many rose as leaders. Driven by the passion to overcome obstacles, and the desire to contribute towards the cause, students joined forces virtually, to volunteer their time.

One such initiative was born when a casual tweet from a medical student spiralled off a chain of responses that led to the creation of the movement now known as #Students_Against_COVID, or SAC. As a multi-disciplinary online platform defying the boundaries of space and time, students and allies from around the world have connected to address the major challenges of these trying times. Metro Detroit, a sub team within SAC, assisted with drives calling for personal protective equipment (#PPE), while others helped in the curation of a clinical resources database for frontline health professionals caring for COVID-19 patients. At the heart of the movement, students have united to share ideas on medical education, research, and global health. One core objective is fighting the “infodemic” of the century. As such, different health campaigns created by public health guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) were translated into over 40 languages by volunteers aiming to disseminate accurate, evidence-based information. Ensuring that scientific knowledge is accessible and comprehensible to the general public is of utmost importance, particularly during a pandemic. Additionally, students started a research mentorship program, formed a conference taskforce, and sought to elevate each other’s voices.

In the past few months, SAC has encouraged members to explore different skill sets and strengthen existing ones, and has transformed them into resilient leaders, engaging in acts of goodness. These innovative forms of collaboration during the crisis provided students with a sense of purpose, connection, and fulfillment, all the while opening up avenues for leadership and inspiration as advocates for change. As compassionate members of society, the movement enhances the zest for a better world by encouraging social accountability within members in order to make a tangible difference.

Although COVID-19 has engendered many downfalls, one of the biggest accomplishments that this pandemic will be remembered for is the power of collective thinking, innovation, and the courage possessed by students to converse and unite on virtual platforms. Serving as the impetus for connection, virtual volunteerism has paved the way for meaningful relationships and friendships that may not have been possible otherwise.

About the author

Leah Sarah Peer (BSc), is a second-year medical student at Saint James School of Medicine. She is passionate about global health, social justice, and accessibility of medical care for underserved communities across the world, and is the recipient of the Anne C. Carter Global Health Fellowship by the American Medical Women’s Association (AMWA).

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