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The Psychological Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic over the Family Medicine Program: Lessons to Learn and Actions to be taken

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In December 2019, the Chinese health authorities announced the detection of the initial few cases of COVID 19 (later referred to as SARS-COV2) infection in Wuhan, Hubei ("Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) SITUATION REPORT - 1 21 JANUARY 2020", 2020). This announcement was followed by swift measures aiming to limit the spread of the infection to other provinces in China. However, by January 2020, other Chinese provinces and countries in southeast Asia started to report cases of COVID-19 infection ("China coronavirus: Lockdown measures rise across Hubei province", 2020). Later, by March, the WHO announced COVID-19 as an official pandemic ("Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) - events as they happen", 2020). Despite all these signs and warnings, little attention was paid to the subject as the numbers of positive cases were limited, and most people thought that this would be similar to the previous 2019 pandemic (H1N1). It was not until early March 2020, when an unpredicted surge of positive cases was discovered in Qatar. This discovery generated a declaration of a state of medical emergency in Qatar, and many of the medical professionals were deployed to Covid-19 facilities.

The rise of the COVID-19 cases was unexpectedly high and fast. This had a massive effect on the medical education process on all the residency programs in Qatar (under the medical education department at Hamad Medical Corporation(HMC)), including the Family Medicine program, which is the only Family Medicine residency program in Qatar. The effect of the

COVID-19 pandemic over the Family Medicine program was catastrophic as almost all the residents were assigned roles in this pandemic (unlike other non-medical programs such as general surgery and orthopedics, where only 50 % of the residents were assigned to serve in COVID-19 centers). By the 12th of April 2020, 47 out of 56 residents were assigned to one of the COVID-19 facilities. This emergency deployment resulted in halting all the academic activities of the program, including the Arab board exams for the last year's residents. This resulted in several issues, starting from the psychological trauma of postponing the exams that were planned to be set by mid-March (2 weeks after the discovery of the cases in Qatar), to initiating a process of appeals for those residents to Human Resources (HR) of Hamad medical corporation (HMC) to extend their contracts. Residents of other Postgraduate Year (PGY) levels were on a similar amount of stress; this is largely due to the fact that they were preparing for the annual departmental exam (which determines eligibility to continue to the next residency level). Moreover, the limited amount of information that was available regarding this new disease created a stressful situation for the residents, as they have to read and keep up with the updates regarding this pandemic, and also they had to keep up with the increased load of work, that was directly proportional to the exponential increase of the cases in Qatar. All these factors severely affected their morale and psychological state. In addition, the Family

Medicine residents were not immune to the psychological stresses that affected other frontline workers in this pandemic such as; fear to spread the infection to their family members, experience the loss of the patients in their care, and the stigma of being workers in this hazardous environment (World Health Organization, 2020).

Luckily, the signs of the psychological impact were detected early and actions from the different health departments and associations were employed to solve this issue before it reached a critical threshold. The Qatar Medical Association (QMA) took the initiative to voluntarily contact the residents and inquire about the psychological challenges. The QMA was the first to take action as they started to provide psychological counseling over the phone. This initiative was carried out by a volunteered psychiatry physician in the HMC. Later on, the HMC adopted this approach and announced a regular psychiatry wellbeing surveillance among the frontline workers. In addition, the HMC placed a number of regulations to include residents in the COVID-19 wards; pregnant residents, residents with chronic diseases, immunocompromised residents, and those who have their spouses working in other COVID-19 facilities were exempted from COVID-19 services. Furthermore, the Family Medicine faculty and mentors were asked to contact their mentees to provide mental support to the residents and communicate any concerns to the program director. Moreover, the Family Medicine residency program along with the Medical Education program and the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) recommended to turn the direction of the end of the year Family Medicine resident evaluation into a more supportive approach. This meant that all the traditionally used tools of evaluation (departmental exams, formative evaluations, Mini clinical evaluation exercise (Mini-CEX), direct observation of procedure skills (DOPs)) were not taken into consideration to assess the progress of the resident. This year's assessment of the residents largely depends on the evaluation of the direct supervising consultants in their COVID-19 wards. The step of canceling the departmental exam for this year and mainly depending on the evaluation carried out by the training faculty of the program had a positive impact on the residents of the Family Medicine program, and significantly increased their morale and positively affected their performance in the COVID-19 centers, which is reflected in the increase of the scholarly activities and publication they took part in. However, residents were informed that their progression through

the academic year will be subjective to another detailed evaluation that would be carried out once the risk of the pandemic subsides.

By the 15th of June 2020, the health authorities in Qatar announced the end of the pandemic peak and started the gradual process of lifting the restrictions (Staff, 2020). This process was followed by a green light from the Medical Education department at HMC to the department of Family Medicine to resume the educational activity. The program assessed that the residents were in need of a break after all the time they spent in COVID-19 centers, and therefore, the residents were granted a 2-weeks break period before resuming the educational activity. Moreover, interactive stress management sessions were provided through webinars by the training faculty of the program. In addition, the program of Family Medicine acknowledged the effort made by the residents by sending them gratitude emails along with the good news that they had been automatically promoted to the next level of the residency programs.

Now that the situation of the pandemic is improving significantly, the Family Medicine residency program has started to reflect on the actions taken through the pandemic and to set plans to prevent similar mistakes in the future. It was clear that most of the measures taken to ensure the wellbeing of the residents during the pandemic were simply reactions to the discovered problems that came as a result of initiations carried out by independent associations, such as the Qatar Medical Association (QMA), and still, no other problems have been detected. Therefore, further consideration and brainstorming of possible impacts should be explored. Moreover, to avoid similar consequences on the career of future residents, plans and strategies should be implemented, and training of the faculty of the Family Medicine program, to deal with these issues before they emerge. A meeting among the faculty of the Family Medicine program was held in order to avoid similar situations in the future (e.g. new pandemics) and to prepare for a possible second wave of the infection, if needed, with minimal impact over the educational process of the residents and their mental wellbeing. Keeping in mind that all the scenarios are possible, the department decided to integrate technology in the teaching process of the residents in order to obey the social distancing restrictions. Moreover, a faculty member was assigned to give a lecture for the residents, aiming to reflect on the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. The faculty of the Family Medicine program agreed on the necessity to

include pandemic control measures in the educational plan of the residency program to prepare them mentally for future challenges, which will include changes in the curriculum of the next academic year. Furthermore, the Family medicine program started a wellbeing committee that includes representatives of each PGY levels in order to detect any similar problems in the future. Finally, a suggestion was presented, to hold a workshop in collaboration with the Disaster Management department at the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH), around the beginning of the year 2021 to have a better understanding on the measures that were used to control the pandemic in Qatar and figure better approaches to avoid such adversities in the future.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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