

COVID-19: A Mini-Series Part 5: The Student Experience

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Christina Wynans, Bernice Lau, Shireen Ng, Kabisha Velauthapillai, Jessica Chiang, Sarah Gregor, Mikaela Stiver, Sukhbir Manku

00:01

Mikaela Stiver: As we near the end of 2020, Canada is experiencing a second wave of COVID-19 and the number of cases continues to surge globally with well over half a million new cases reported each day. On the day of this recording, the total number of global cases will surpass 50 million according to the Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center. In this fifth and final installment of the rehabINK podcast COVID-19 Mini-Series, we highlight experiences from students from the Temerty Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto. Over the past several months, we collected audio clips from students in various programs to share their perspectives and opinions on what it's been like being students during a pandemic. My name is Mikaela Stiver and I'm a PhD candidate in the Rehabilitation Sciences Institute at the University of Toronto.

00:47

Bernice Lau: And I'm Bernice Lau, a second year Master's of Physical Therapy or PT student, also at the University of Toronto. So we'd like to give a huge shout out to everyone who submitted their audio for this podcast. And we're thrilled to feature clips from students who are in PT, speech language pathology, or SLP, medicine, PhD and research stream Master's programs.

[chime]

01:23

Bernice Lau: So personally, this situation is still quite confusing to me, as I'm sure it is for most people. But I have felt more comfortable than I did back in March or April. And this might have something to do with seeing most people in public spaces wearing masks, taking the proper precautions, or the fact that we have access to PPE in hospitals, which is where I'm currently doing my clinical placement.

01:44

Mikaela Stiver: Absolutely, honestly, it's kind of wild to think that this has become our new normal, at least for the time being. And I know education has been particularly challenging in the time of COVID, so I was quite eager to hear from other students about their experiences.

[chime]

02:03

Bernice Lau: So first, we wanted to address some of the short-term impacts of the pandemic on the student experience; specifically changes to current academic programs. So for me, as a PT student, a lot of our learning involves hands on skills. So not being able to do that made retaining the information a lot more difficult, and my classmate Sukh brought this up as well.

02:25

Sukhbir Manku: Hands-on training is so critical for this stream and we've had to learn content in a different format. And so we learned all of the, kind of, lecture and theory behind specific training. And then we had to wait a while until we could actually perform the training, we were able to enter our building and practice the stuff afterwards. But it was definitely not the intended purpose, but we made it work.

02:53

Bernice Lau: Other PT students, Shireen and Jessica expanded upon the challenges to changes in our clinical and anatomy labs.

03:01

Shireen Ng: So being in a clinical stream, my training has been affected with the new way of doing labs. So before, during each lab, we were able to work with a different person or choose who we would want to work with. However, since this pandemic, and since being back in-person, we are now in a specific pod with the same partner that we work with every lab. And I think this has really affected my training because in our profession as physios, we are required to know and work with different body types because every patient is different: their size is different, the way their limbs feel is different, and the way they respond to our hands-on technique will be different. Therefore, I found it challenging now that I'm not able to work with different people and I'm working with the same partner, I find it harder to consolidate my learning as well. I feel that I'm not able to apply the skills I need to practice in an efficient manner. However, I do understand that these safety precautions are necessary and I am thankful that we are able to be back learning in-person rather than just being online. But I would say that that is one of the biggest ways that I feel like we've been impacted ever since this pandemic.

04:35

Jessica Chiang: I'm in the PT program and so we had online classes and no labs until late July, so I found that separation between theoretical and practical content made it really hard for me to consolidate and learn the practical content when we had in-person labs. Furthermore, we had no in-person anatomy lab so didn't have the opportunity to dissect. And personally I found dissections very useful in our musculoskeletal unit as it really helped me visualize what was happening in the muscle and tissues, and how that could affect clinical presentation.

05:11

Bernice Lau: And another obstacle that we had to face was our clinical placements actually getting delayed, which Shireen expanded upon.

05:14

Shireen Ng: For me personally, I was most excited for all of our internship opportunities, especially given our profession, which requires so much hands-on practice, learning on the spot, and clinical exposure to different patients and situations. So I feel that the most challenging aspect for me is knowing that our internships have been delayed. And I feel like that has really affected how I take in the information in our online lectures because I find it just so unrealistic and I'm not sure how I can be applying my knowledge. And even though we are challenged to apply the theory that we've learned in our labs, I think, for me, I know that the lab situations are just not realistic. And I really want to be able to see real life situations and be challenged to think and adapt on the spot. And so with our internships being delayed, I think there were many points in time during this pandemic, that I wondered whether I would be competent, and whether I would be able to handle patients in real life. And I think this, these thoughts of doubt, is what has been most challenging while studying during COVID-19.

06:38

Bernice Lau: And it wasn't only the PTs that got affected by this, but all rehab programs. So Christina, a second year SLP student discusses this as well.

06:48

Christina Wynans: So we had just started our first clinical placement when the pandemic happened. And I was actually supposed to be doing an international placement in Trinidad, but that was canceled the day before our flight was supposed to leave. So I was re-assigned to the Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital, but I was only there for a week before all the local placements in our program were canceled as well.

07:09

Bernice Lau: So there have definitely been a lot of changes to our curricula, which made learning a lot more challenging, especially with the lack of in-person instruction. But we've been all trying to do our best and we have been able to make it work.

07:22

Mikaela Stiver: Yeah, for sure, I know clinical programs have been hit very hard by the pandemic. But PhD and research stream Master's students have also been experiencing some really unique challenges as a result of COVID-19. Right now I'm in the final year of my PhD and I was fortunate not to have had to make too many adjustments to my research. We were able to return to our lab toward the end of June, but with significant capacity limitations, so it's taking me a lot longer to complete my data collection than initially anticipated. But for me, the best course of action has just been to temper my expectations a little bit and push back my defense date into 2021. Sarah is also a PhD candidate in the Rehabilitation Sciences Institute, and she describes a similar experience. Let's have a listen.

08:05

Sarah Gregor: The pandemic has required me to develop one new study and change a second study to be online. This has been a really stressful change as I'm in the fourth year of my degree and was hoping to be finishing data collection, not starting or re-starting new projects at this time. So, the pandemic has definitely impacted my timeline and the amount of work I need to put in daily to try to finish my degree on time.

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Mikaela Stiver: We also heard from Insiya, who is a second year PhD student and she had to return early from conducting research abroad in Pakistan. In her case, she mentioned that she's been able to adapt by collecting some of her data online.

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Insiya Bhalloo: I came back from Pakistan and my data collection was cut short, but I'm hoping that in the future, I'll still be able to collect data online even though the timezone is gonna be crazy. There's a 10 hour difference between Karachi which is the city where I was collecting data in, and Toronto, and on the other hand, moving the tests online in Canada, although it's taking a bit longer, it's given me access to other provinces that I otherwise wouldn't have been able to collect data enough. And I feel like perhaps I might have, I'm now getting more participants because parents feel like they don't really have to do anything. They don't have to drive their child to, let's say, 500 University [Avenue] or they don't have to drive to a community center for me to conduct testing, they can just do it from their home.

09:31

Mikaela Stiver: Now unfortunately, not all research is conducive to online data collection. Some people like Master's students, Nithin and Vahid, are having to make some difficult decisions about changing the scope of their theses as a whole.

09:43

Nithin Jacob: For me, I won't be able to recruit participants until they lift the ban. So, an alternative option is to do, like, focus my thesis on a narrative review or systematic review.

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Vahid Anwari: Yeah, like Nithin, I don't think we're recruiting any any more patients. The last patient we recruited was like way, early January. So we have 60 but we need 60 more. But I doubt people are gonna be more inclined to come to a hospital even, even when the ban is lifted there, they're not going to be more willing, as before to participate in, in research studies. So yeah, I do think we have to re-think our study as a whole.

10:29

Mikaela Stiver: So it's been really interesting to hear how the pandemic has impacted students' individual experiences during their degrees. But we were also quite curious to hear their thoughts about how their departments and the university as a whole have been responding to the pandemic.

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Bernice Lau: So from my perspective, as a PT student, the PT department in particular, have actually supported us quite well. So my classmates and I have felt they've really tried to include us in the decision making process and just making sure that we felt very comfortable with everything that was going on.

11:01

Shireen Ng: To adapt to public health recommendations, the PT program has assigned each student to a specific pod, and each pod is in the same lab room at all times. And we have two different lab sessions, a morning session and an afternoon session, to limit the amount of students that are in a building at one time. We also have to sign in and sign out for contact tracing, and during our labs, we are required to wear a face shield and mask, the plinths are all spaced out for adequate distancing, and students are also instructed to stay in their own station during the lab.

11:41

Sukhbir Manku: Honestly, the best support has just been my my peers, my family, as well as the faculty. They've been so accommodating, so understanding, and just so so supportive in our overall well-being not necessarily just our education, but rather just like how are we overall feeling, how is our mental health, and just knowing that they care as much as they do is enough to keep me going.

12:07

Bernice Lau: I do echo Shireen and Sukh's input on how caring our faculty is and all the hard work that they're doing to help keep our curriculum going definitely doesn't go unnoticed. But of course, online learning, it's not ideal, and I have had some concerns before starting placement about how much I've actually learned before starting. However, given the circumstances, I really can't complain about what we've been able to do.

12:30

Mikaela Stiver: Yeah, that's a great point. I've sort of been on the other side of the table as a Teaching Assistant for the past eight or nine months, it's been really challenging to actually gauge how well students are understanding the material.

12:43

Bernice Lau: Mm hmm.

12:44

Mikaela Stiver: I think there's a lot of potential for virtual education, but it's not as simple as just recording lectures, posting videos, calling it a day. It actually requires a lot of planning, research, and resources that simply weren't available on a moment's notice, not to mention the fact that we have not been able to address the numerous barriers that are associated with online learning.

13:01

Bernice Lau: I've definitely thought about that as well a lot because myself and other students, we have the privilege of computers and internet access and a workspace at home, which we shouldn't

assume that everyone has. So this kind of brings us to the flip side where approaches by the university may have worked for most students, but then fail to support many others. So a really simple example is how we started classes and exams in Ontario here at 9am. But for the West Coast friends, it meant that they had to be up for 6am.

13:34

Mikaela Stiver: Exactly. As a self-proclaimed night owl, I definitely can't imagine trying to be functional at 6 a.m. Even more so honestly, though, I think it speaks to systemic barriers and the need to acknowledge that the pandemic has not affected all students equally. So Kabisha just recently finished a research based graduate degree and is now a student in the MD program. And she had this to say regarding access to supports and suggestions for the future.

14:00

Kabisha Velauthapillai: When I was doing my research, there was next to no support. Support was aimed at certain people who had certain problems that were socially acceptable, that were less marginalized. So when I reached out to my university, out of the seven people I reached out to about my personal circumstances, and the urgent need for space, there was only one person who really understood and not just in theory, but in practice, that people who are already marginalized were experiencing the brunt of this pandemic. And she was the only person who really made a real effort to make my situation better. So one thing that universities along with our governments need to do is recognize that support for students' needs, particularly those who are marginalized, needs to, like the support needs to take a variety of different shapes. You can't just throw money at the problem, for instance, so students need access to a safe space, and maybe that means opening up the classroom and letting the student come in for the day, and still maintaining social distancing procedures.

15:21

Mikaela Stiver: Right. So evidently, there's a lot of work that needs to be done in this respect. Universities were forced to adapt and act quickly early on in this pandemic, but it's not an excuse for a lack of inclusivity in their response. This is definitely a topic that we can't give its due in the scope of this particular episode, but systemic inequity is a topic that we hope to delve into in the future.

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Bernice Lau: For sure.

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Mikaela Stiver: So next up, we ask students to give us their thoughts about how COVID-19 might impact their future careers, or the future of healthcare in the long term. One topic that came up over and over was the idea of virtual care.

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Bernice Lau: So for our listeners that are unfamiliar with the concept of virtual care, it's any interaction between a patient and members of the healthcare team that occur remotely. So this could include phone or video conferencing. So it's been used by many different health care professionals such as doctors, nurses, pharmacists, as well as other rehab professionals, like PT, OT, and SLP. And

personally, I was never too fond of the idea of virtual care, just because it made creating that rapport with patients really difficult if we're not having those in-person interactions. But throughout the course of the pandemic, I've actually been thinking about it more, and I think I can better appreciate the benefits of integrating technology and healthcare together. Especially because it allows us to reach so many other populations that we otherwise wouldn't be able to provide care for.

16:46

Jessica Chiang: It seems that people think that physio and other healthcare professionals in the future will rely more heavily on virtual care, and given that the platforms and ways we deliver virtual care will hopefully become more established and easier to use for people. And perhaps this can be adapted and applied to improving the accessibility and quality of care in more rural settings.

17:16

Christina Wynans: So I think the pandemic is really going to change service delivery within our field, with a greater shift towards telehealth. I think that being able to provide services remotely will no longer be the specialized sort of skill, but just an expectation that if you're graduating from a program, that you'll know how to do this. This could be a really positive thing, I think, for people in remote communities, or even those with mobility or transportation issues, isolated people who have difficulty attending in-person appointments. So I think it's really going to make speech pathology a lot more accessible to those kinds of populations.

17:55

Kabisha Velauthapillai: I started Medicine this September, and it's quite the experience to have everything in virtual format. I mean, even clinical skills, right. And, you know, while there are some downsides, there are definitely some upsides that I hadn't considered before, like how we get a taste of telemedicine. And it's got me thinking about quite a few of the barriers that rural communities have to face in accessing health care and how this training could potentially equip medical trainees a bit better to serve rural communities.

18:34

Mikaela Stiver: Absolutely. So this is another area where there are definite pros and cons to accessibility, so in terms of access to the internet, or access to a phone line. There's also the availability of safe and private spaces in which to actually conduct the virtual care both from the perspective of the healthcare professional as well as the patient. If you're interested in reading more on this topic, actually, you can find a great article on tele-rehab in Speech Language Pathology, specifically in issue eight of rehabINK.

19:01

Bernice Lau: Great, I love that plug-in for the magazine rehabINK! So, throughout this episode, we've discussed many aspects of the pandemic, specifically the challenges that students have been facing in various points of their academic programs. But there have also been some silver linings to come out of this experience. In the previous four episodes of the COVID-19 Mini-series, we asked our guests to share their thoughts on what could be some positives to come out of the past eight and nine months. In Part One of the Mini-Series, Dr. Larry Robinson, a physiatrist at St. John's Rehab, discussed the

advancements in virtual care and virtual education, such as the opportunity to present about the importance of rehabilitation for patients with COVID-19 to the World Health Organization.

19:50

Mikaela Stiver: Then in Part Two, we spoke with Michelle Legasto, a PhD student and practicing PT who was redeployed during the first wave of COVID-19. She said she thought the pandemic actually helped to indirectly educate the public by highlighting the importance of Rehabilitation Sciences as well as the breadth of the profession.

20:07

Bernice Lau: In Part Three, Dr. Susan Jaglal and John Sheppard, a PhD student at the Rehabilitation Sciences Institute, touched upon the increase in virtual interactions, and how they could help to remove barriers for people living with disabilities, whether this be accessing services or participating in job interviews.

20:26

Mikaela Stiver: And finally, in Part Four, palliative care physician, Dr. Naheed Dosani, spoke about how COVID-19 has helped to amplify open discourse around topics like race, drug use, and housing, and will hopefully inspire people to drive positive change in these areas. So just like all of our past guests, many of the students who contributed audio for this episode also shared their thoughts about some unexpected or positive takeaways experiencing life as a student during a global pandemic. Let's hear what they had to say.

20:55

Sukhbir Manku: Exercise, mindfulness, reaching out to others and still maintaining social connectedness there is probably the most effective way of on my end, and also, taking the time to just you know...taking time to myself, I think, you know, we do, I am finding myself alone quite a bit. But that doesn't always have to be such a negative. So making the most of every moment that I can.

21:22

Jessica Chiang: I found that this extra time really allowed me and prompted me to reach out to friends and old friends and just catch up with them and see what they've been doing all, all along. Or I got to spend more time at home with family, I was lucky enough to spend quarantine with my family at home in Vancouver. And furthermore, I got into home workouts, I found it was a good way to connect with friends and to motivate each other to keep active during this time. And now I'm also getting the option to spend more time outdoors, so going on hikes, beaches, having like picnics and things like that. And this whole experience has really helped me learn to appreciate all the things I took for granted before and it's really given me some more time to reflect just on everything and really to learn more about myself. So I feel like a lot of people caught on to baking, and honestly, I found myself in the kitchen a lot. But I feel like that was a good use of time to just do something that I normally don't have that much time to do especially like making bread and things like that, just takes way too long. Another skill that I've also acquired was I started choreographing my own dances. So I've always danced my whole life, but I've considered myself to lack creativity when it comes to piecing together something of my own. I

feel like I have those like mental creativity blocks, I guess, what is what they're called. But I feel like the extra time really helped me start learning how to choreograph my own things.

23:17

Christina Wynans: So I'm a commuter. And I had gotten so used to my routine every week that I kind of lost track of how much time commuting actually takes up. So not only was I spending like hours on the train, but every Sunday I would prep all of my meals for the week - breakfast, lunch and dinner - so that I can bring them with me downtown on my commute. But now, since I don't have to leave my house ever, I can wake up like right before class, I can grab something from my fridge during a break. So it's made my life just a lot more laid back and something I didn't really realize I was missing until it happened. I also love how much time I get to spend with my dog and she loves being able to sit on my lap during lectures.

23:59

Bernice Lau: So to add on to Christina's comments, I can definitely agree with the positives of not having to commute every day downtown for school. So on average, it takes me about an hour to an hour and a half one way to get down. So being able to save that three hours per day has definitely been a perk, I guess, if you will, during this experience.

24:21

Sarah Gregor: The pandemic has definitely made me slow down and take care of myself more. For example, I have been able to get into a more consistent exercise schedule, which I find is really helpful to help me have energy throughout the day and clear my head. I also have time to actually make myself a nutritious and delicious meal versus just grabbing something on the go. So I actually find that I'm eating a lot healthier as well. Over the past year even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, I really was struggling to decide what to do after my PhD is finished. However, having to take a break from different things that I do including teaching, research, and clinical practice, I was able to reflect on which areas I missed the most. That experience really helped me recognize my passion for teaching and has subsequently changed which opportunities I pursue moving forward, so I can hopefully prepare myself best for a future career as a Professor.

25:17

Shireen Ng: I think for me personally, I had a newfound appreciation for all the faculty members in the PT department, I think that they were just so transparent and working so hard to not leave us in the dark. And they tried their best to include us in all the decision makings. And I can tell that they put in so much effort to change the curriculum in a way that would affect us the least. And also, they really considered the student's perspective, we had weekly townhall meetings, which was so nice, because there was always updates, and also a lot of encouragement from everyone. And I feel like before, when I was an undergrad, I just always saw myself as just a student number to faculty members or to professor professors. But I definitely don't feel that way, here, and I think, without this, this pandemic, I probably wouldn't have recognized it this much. So I'm really thankful for just all the faculty members and everybody for being so transparent with us, and being so supportive during this time. As well, I think something else that has come out of this experience was also me learning to be uncomfortable with the unknown, and also recognizing that I do have it in me to adapt even when I don't think so. And

I think in hindsight, just reflecting on everything that has happened since March, there has been so many changes. But I think I have been able to adapt. And that's something that I can hold on to and remember moving forward when I face other challenging and unknown circumstances.

27:17

Mikaela Stiver: Yeah, I think Shireen makes a really good point. If nothing else, it's helped us as students to build resilience, and patience, and perseverance, which are all things that are going to be really beneficial to us in the long-term and in our long-term careers.

27:31

Bernice Lau: That's something that they've definitely pushed on us in the program. I think from day one, they're always telling us to become comfortable with the uncomfortable. So I guess if anything, that's definitely what she's talking about, for this experience. So it's definitely been a really confusing and frightening time for everyone. But I'm glad that there have been some positives to come out of this experience. And I can definitely agree with having a greater appreciation for the little things in life. So to wrap up and close up this episode, we'd like to leave our listeners with some thoughts from Kabisha regarding next steps, and what we should be doing moving forward.

28:09

Kabisha Velauthapillai: I really emphasize the need to reshape the way we act on public health emergencies, and how it's imperative that we center equity. Our pandemic strategies that we currently use repeatedly leave behind way too many people who are already experiencing society's inequities. So for this, we need marginalized students and more generally marginalized communities at the center of our conversations.

[chime]

28:48

Mikaela Stiver: Thanks for tuning in to Part Five of the rehabINK podcast COVID-19 Miniseries. This initiative has been generously supported by a COVID-19 Student Engagement Award from the University of Toronto.

28:59

Bernice Lau: We hope you enjoyed this episode on how the pandemic has impacted the lives of students in clinical and research programs at the University of Toronto. This marks the end of our COVID-19 Mini-Series, but be sure to check out future episodes of the rehabINK podcast on Podbean, Spotify, Apple podcasts and Google podcasts.

29:18

Mikaela Stiver: And if you'd like to read more about rehabINK, our student-led research-driven digital magazine or Rehabilitation Sciences in general, you can visit our website at www.rehabinkmag.com. That's r-e-h-a-b-i-n-k-m-a-g dot com.

[chime]