



# International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: [www.ijrpr.com](http://www.ijrpr.com) ISSN 2582-7421

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## Letter to the Editor

# E-Learning and Near-Peer Teaching in Ophthalmology during Covid-19

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi.2022.3.2.5>

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## To the Editor:

The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted higher education across the UK, resulting in the cancellation of exams and an uptake in distance learning. Medical education in particular was faced with the pressures of sustaining teaching during these difficult periods, for medical students across all year groups [1].

Most medical schools graduated their final year students in March 2020, to facilitate the commencement of interim Foundation Year posts. At our former university, the University of Edinburgh, there was an overwhelming response from newly qualified doctors who wanted to volunteer. Clinical placements for medical students were cancelled, and due to the redeployment of clinicians, there was reduced staff capacity for teaching. To help counter this, Covid-19 Teaching Assistant (TA) posts were created for newly qualified graduates, to act as near-peer tutors for fourth and fifth year students.

Ophthalmology in Edinburgh is taught in Year 5 and traditionally utilised a mix of lectures, clinical skill sessions and clinic shadowing as part of the teaching block. However, at the advent of the pandemic, facilitators were tasked with delivering teaching remotely. This led to the development of new e-learning tools including online case-based scenarios and multiple-choice questions, which the Covid-19 TAs played an active role in developing and disseminating. Medical students therefore benefitted from increased contact hours and smaller groups for teaching, which helped compensate for the loss of clinical contact. The Covid-19 TAs also developed as medical educators, as part of the medical school's Clinical Educator Programme (CEP), which ran a series of workshops and online modules on medical education for the tutors. A group of new graduates also developed an online Ophthalmology revision programme for students, in partnership with ophthalmologists based in Edinburgh, which was well received and demonstrated the impact of near-peer teaching. It is interesting to note that a recent study into the effectivity of near-peer teaching found it to be mutually benefit and to have a positive impact on student development [2].

There are lessons to be learned from the challenges we have all faced, that can be taken forward to stimulate e-learning and near-peer education in undergraduate Ophthalmology and other specialties. Whilst the response from medical education faculty to the pandemic was remarkable and feedback received was wholly positive, it remains that medical students receive very limited training in medication education. Medical students will continue to graduate during the pandemic and even in a post-pandemic world, and it would appear that near-peer tutoring will play a role. It is important to note that teaching is highlighted as an essential graduate attribute by the GMC Outcome for Graduates 2018 [3], and that a key responsibility of the medical profession is the education of undergraduate students and junior colleagues. This further reiterates the importance of educators ensuring that medical students are being trained in the art of teaching [4], and that medical school curriculums and their learning outcomes are revised to reflect the importance of this.

We hope this piece will provide educators and clinicians with an insight into the importance of considering near-peer teaching, the training of medical students in medical education and engagement with digital education.

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**Disclosure:**

The authors report no conflict of interest in this communication.

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