

21 January 2021

Press release

University of Strasbourg

Anxiety among medical students during the COVID-19 public health crisis

Should medical students have been sent to the “front lines” during a pandemic?

This press release is a summary of a paper published on 16/01/2021 in the science journal *Internal and Emergency Medicine*.

To read the full study (in English), click [here](#).

Press Contact

University of Strasbourg

Alexandre Tatay

Press Attaché

Mobile: +33.6 80 52 01 82

tatay@unistra.fr

www.unistra.fr

The Centre de Formation et de Recherche en Pédagogie des Sciences de la Santé (Strasbourg Faculty of Medicine) and the Unit of Development and Research in Medical Education of the University of Geneva (Switzerland) have been conducting a wide-scale study since 2018 on anxiety among medical students. The study, which began before the COVID-19 public health crisis, made it possible to measure changes in student anxiety levels at the end of the first lockdown, challenging several pre-conceived ideas.

This study, which is the result of a collaboration between students, medical interns and teacher-researchers was carried out by:

Thierry Pelaccia, University Professor and hospital practitioner, director of the *Centre de Formation et de Recherche en Pédagogie des Sciences de la Santé*, University of Strasbourg and *Hôpitaux universitaires de Strasbourg*

Jean Sibilia, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine

Élodie Fels, fifth-year medical student at the Faculty of Medicine in Strasbourg

Lucas Gauer, neurology intern at the Faculty of Medicine in Strasbourg

Audrey Musanda, intern in general medicine at the Faculty of Medicine in Strasbourg

François Severac, university hospital practitioner with the *Groupe Méthodes en Recherche Clinique* of the *pôle santé publique* of the *Hôpitaux universitaires de Strasbourg*

Milena Abbiati, psychologist at the *Institut de psychiatrie légale des hôpitaux universitaires de Lausanne* and at the Unit of Development and Research in Medical Education of the *Hôpitaux Universitaires de Genève*

Partners

Centre de formation et de recherche en pédagogie des sciences de la santé of the Strasbourg Faculty of Medicine

Unity of Development and Research in Medical Education of the University of Geneva

Should medical students have been sent to work with the SAMU, the emergency services and the intensive care units during a pandemic?

The COVID-19 crisis forced academic and health authorities throughout the world to ask the same question: should students be mobilised to assist health professionals in treating COVID patients? The subject continues to divide opinion today.

Many people consider that calling on students in such a context is just another source of anxiety for an already fragile group. However, in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and in France, as well as in many other countries, policymakers, after initially suspending all internships, allowed students to return to clinical care on a voluntary basis.

In 2018, all 2nd to 6th-year students at the Strasbourg Faculty of Medicine were included in a vast study to measure their anxiety levels. In 2020, new measurements were carried out in the middle of the pandemic, with a response rate approaching 80%. The aim was to examine the experiences of medical students during the public health crisis and its impact on their anxiety.

Of the 1,180 respondents, 481 had decided to return to clinical care in order to assist the health care professionals. They were assigned to eleven hospitals in Alsace, the region that was the first and hardest hit by the public health crisis in France.

A study conducted by students, medical interns and teacher-researchers

It is thanks to the collaboration between students, medical interns and teacher-researchers that the study achieved such a high response rate.

The results challenge many preconceived ideas, and were also confirmed in Switzerland

The anxiety levels measured in medical students were comparable to those measured in the general population during the COVID period. They increased moderately between 2018 and 2020, with 14% and 7% more students with high and serious levels of anxiety, respectively. The impact of the pandemic on the well-being of students is therefore very real, but it is not as dramatic as one might spontaneously think.

The students who were mobilised in clinical care were less anxious than those who stayed at home. Their anxiety levels were similar and, more often than not, non-pathological (i.e. weak to moderate), wherever they were assigned to work, including when they had worked "at the front", in front-line hospital services (SAMU, emergency services, ICUs). Preliminary results obtained from students at the Geneva Faculty of Medicine lead to the same conclusions.

The researchers' hypothesis is that volunteering to work in clinical care, on the psychological level, is a form of coping strategy. Active involvement and considering such a situation as a learning opportunity could help to limit anxiety.

What can be concluded from the study?

The study shows that as far as anxiety is concerned, opposing the mobilisation of medical students to clinical care, including front-line services during such crises, is not justified, as long as they are volunteers and their protection against the risk of infection can be ensured. The main source of anxiety for students was linked to the fact that they had to stay at home. There is, however, reason to question the wish to keep them away from their usual place of learning at all costs.

The study in figures

- 1,180 participants, from the second to the sixth year of medicine
- A response rate approaching 80%
- 4 out of 10 students volunteered, of whom half were assigned to front-line services (SAMU, emergency, ICUs)
- Two out of three mobilised students believe they have developed new skills
- One out of six students claims that their experience has influenced their choice of future speciality