



Preparation for the United States Medical Licensing Examinations in the Face of COVID-19

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the canceling and rescheduling of the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) examinations due to the nationwide closure of the Prometric testing centers, which poses a significant challenge to medical students. The rescheduling of a high-stakes board examination leads to significant stress and potential burnout. Students may need guidance to decrease anxiety and reframe their study plan while maintaining their knowledge. Here, we combined board examination coaching tips with specific worked examples to describe how to prevent burnout, give recommendations for scheduling, and suggest practical approaches to USMLE and other high-stakes examinations.

Keywords COVID-19 · USMLE examination preparation · Burnout · Scheduling · Approach · Coaching

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused uncertainty and anxiety at all levels of education, and medical education is no exception. It has made a remarkable impact during a time of educational transition for medical students, especially for students who are preparing to take the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) licensing examinations.

Performance on USMLE step 1 and 2 examinations is a major consideration for residency programs in selecting medical school graduates [1–3]. Under normal circumstances, medical students who are facing the high-stakes USMLE examinations are challenged by the intensity and length of study. For example, in step 1 preparation, it was reported that the average studying time per day is over 11 h for 35 consecutive days [4]. During this period, students' emotional, mental, and physical coping methods are continually challenged.

With the initial nationwide closure of Prometric centers, partial “soft” openings, and continued glitches of unpredictable cancellations of the test dates, students with pre-scheduled test dates in March and April had to reschedule to later dates with the hope of being able to sit for their respective exams. In addition, the discrepancy between the Prometric's official statements and planned operating procedures (NBME.org) forced students to face waves of cancellations of their rescheduled dates in May and June. Some students with confirmed dates from the Prometric centers arrived to test and were met with cancellation. This prompted an unprecedented acknowledgment from the USMLE of Prometric's “failure to fulfill its obligation to examinees.” As a result, students have to modify—and often extend—their study plans. This unexpected turn of events will likely increase their anxiety and risk of burnout, which can directly impact their performance [5].

Furthermore, with more than half of the medical student population already experiencing burnout, estimated by a major multi-institutional study pre-COVID-19, the negative impact of COVID-19 on student's well-being and burnout cannot be ignored [6]. In addition, burnout has been associated with decreasing empathy [7]. Empathy holds one of the core values in physician-patient care. Chen and colleagues [8] characterized that there was a declining level of empathy among students as early as the third year of medical school. Therefore, it will require multi-faceted approaches to generate practical ways to alleviate stress. Specifically, during these

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