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Dr. Jill Rudkowski: Adapting the Clerkship program during Covid-19

On March 16, 2020, during the earliest stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, the DeGroot School of Medicine at McMaster made the difficult decision to pull its undergraduate medical students out of the clinical learning environment.

“The system was in crisis and nobody knew what they were dealing with. We didn’t have a good understanding of safety. That was a decision across the country – all students in all provinces were pulled out of the clinical environment at the same time,” said Dr. Jill Rudkowski, the Chair of Clerkship and Concept Integration and Review for the DeGroot School of Medicine at McMaster.

“We had to consider the safety of the students, the safety of the patients, the safety of the faculty, and the capacity of the system to host learners.”

It was up to Dr. Rudkowski and her Clerkship team to figure out a way to continue to train medical students while not having access

to learning in the clinical environment. In response, in the span of just two weeks, she led the creation of an 11-week curriculum to replace some of the learning they would have experienced had it not been for Covid-19.

“I’ve never faced a bigger challenge,” she said. “It was very intense.”

While the class of 2020 was only a few weeks away from graduation, they were able to complete their remaining clerkship rotations relatively smoothly. However, Dr. Rudkowski points out that it quickly became apparent that the class of 2021 was not going to get back into the clinical environment before

July. Dr. Rudkowski was faced with the challenge of helping students at all three McMaster Medicine campuses – Hamilton, Waterloo and Niagara— stay on track towards graduation in May 2021 in order to begin their postgraduate residency training on time.

The curriculum Dr. Rudkowski created, called the Virtual Longitudinal Clerkship, provided a mix of learning opportunities reflecting some of the learning students would have done during their clinical rotations. This included live virtual teaching sessions with Faculty across many McMaster Departments (Family Medicine, Pediatrics, Surgery, Anesthesia, Obstetrics and Gynecology, and Psychiatry).

Photo taken pre-COVID





Photos taken pre-COVID

“We had faculty from across the Departments at McMaster who hosted those live teaching sessions and created the content very last minute. It was really incredible to see such strong collaboration,” Dr. Rudkowski said.

Dr. Rudkowski also curated online resources for students to use for self-study, and every student was introduced to the skills needed for virtual patient care through online sessions with faculty and standardized patients. Dr. Rudkowski points out that these skills became crucial, as students would need to have the skills to properly assess patients’ health virtually when they returned to in-person learning – something that few learners or physicians had any experience with prior to the pandemic.

The Class of 2021 was ultimately able to return to the clinical environment full-time in July. However, that created

a ripple effect for the Class of 2022, which would usually have started pre-clerkship electives over the summer. As a result, Dr. Rudkowski worked with the undergraduate medical team to develop a new “Transition to Clerkship” 12-week curriculum for the class of 2022 so that they would be on track for Clerkship in January 2022. This was a hybrid course comprised of virtual small and large group sessions, the virtual patient care course, in-person skills training, and clinical electives.

“I think it was the best success we could have had with the challenges that we faced,” she said. “It was just an unbelievable year of having to just completely rethink how we delivered content for clerkship and pivot on a dime. I have never been more grateful for the collaboration and dedication of the people I work with.”



Dr. Rudkowski was also able to rely on the support of and ingenuity of colleagues across Canada as the Chair of the Clerkship Network of the Association of the Faculties of Medicine of Canada.

“It’s been really neat to be able to collaborate and liaise with colleagues across the country who are charged with running Clerkship at all 17 medical schools, especially with the pandemic,” she said. “We’ve been able to create a really solid network of communication, idea-sharing, and support so that nobody feels like they’re in it alone.” ■