

## **LETTER TO THE EDITOR**

### **The Role of The University of Buckingham's Public Health Society in Being Socially Accountable: Raising Awareness on Public Health Issues, Supporting Local Authorities in Addressing Health Inequalities and Exploring COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy Amongst Vulnerable Groups**

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To the Editor,

Ironic as it may seem, it has been found that medical students often feel out-of-touch with their social purpose. Consequently, the need for medical schools to demonstrate social accountability has increased, as a means of bridging this gap and allowing medical students to make a difference towards decreasing health inequalities (Gillam et al., 2016). The World Health Organization (WHO) describes the social accountability of educational institutions as the duty to tackle the main health concerns of the community, through service activities, research and education (WHO, 2000). Public health societies provide a platform for students to explore the health needs of the community, advocate for vulnerable groups and actively participate in raising awareness on health inequalities. For this reason, public health societies play a crucial role in medical education, in both acknowledging and fulfilling these purposes.

The University of Buckingham Public Health Society (the 'Society') provides the opportunity to build on core academic teaching by encouraging students to explore public health issues outside of the classroom. This includes forming links with local authorities and engaging in health promotion with patients through awareness webinars. To facilitate online learning during COVID-19, the Society's website and resources, such as newsletters, have been made open to

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both members and non-members free-of-charge. Additionally, a unique aspect of the Society is that it explores health issues spanning multiple specialties. This has been evidenced through our past webinars: breast cancer, World Heart Day and World AIDS Day, miscarriage and baby loss, World Diabetes Day, childhood poverty and medical electives. Raising awareness on issues that are not extensively discussed in medical school has enabled us to hear and gain an understanding about the most vulnerable communities in society.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has made it even more important to engage with the public to understand the unique health needs and beliefs of different communities. The vast amount of information – and often, misinformation – has created fear amongst vulnerable groups. One such concern has been the effect of the COVID-19 vaccines on fertility, pregnancy and maternity. Attending the NHS England and Improvement (NHSEI) webinar allowed Society members to engage with clinicians and the public to understand key barriers and recommendations on vaccination. Overarching themes included: the need for risk-benefit discussions with patients, positive public health messaging to alleviate fears and multimedia campaigns to dispel myths. Literature was then further studied, and summary slides were formed on barriers and recommendations for vaccinating a variety of vulnerable groups.

Similarly, students attended a London-Bangladeshi community COVID-19 information webinar and made notes that were subsequently used by Society members to make a frequently asked questions spreadsheet. The issues discussed in the webinar included: the importance of taking the COVID-19 vaccine, the increased risks for the Bangladeshi community to contract COVID-19 and other steps being taken to tackle the pandemic. The event reinforced: the ways webinars can be used as a health improvement strategy; the importance of representation from ethnic minorities to increase engagement in health-related discussions; and the range of concerns that may be present when implementing a new vaccination programme.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 section on the website outlines important queries regarding vaccine hesitancy, with the aim of educating and spreading COVID-19 vaccine awareness. Opportunities to engage with future events and contribute to the *Journal of Medical*

*Education Research* have also been provided. Social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter have also been used to successfully connect with medical students and university staff.

Overall, the Society has made an effective start in raising awareness on public health issues. From the Society's infancy in September 2020, increases in student engagement have been observed through a rise in website traffic, follower count, membership registrations and participation in regular syllabus-related quizzes. The Society aims to continue providing educational webinars with guest speakers for the University of Buckingham medical students.

Future goals include collaborative events with other societies, fundraising events and opportunities for medical students to work closely with local communities.

We believe in working in partnership with our medical students and the community to allow for the efficient delivery of public health education. Going forward, this will allow us to have a holistic approach with patients and the public, through being socially accountable as medical students and, ultimately, as doctors of the future.

Yours sincerely,

University of Buckingham's Public Health Society Executives

## REFERENCES

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