

C.O.U. Office of Health Sciences

Principles— The Role of Health Science Students¹ in a Pandemic

Background:

Planning for a possible pandemic is currently in progress at all levels of government, universities, and within health care organizations. Given the health human resource challenges that would be faced in a provincial emergency, it is essential that health science schools and faculties are clear regarding the role of health science students in a pandemic. The SARS experience demonstrated the merit of students remaining in the practice setting as learners (Students and the SARS Experience, 2003). However, clarity is needed regarding the role students should play so that learning can occur in a safe and effective manner.

The following principles are intended to guide decision-making in the event of a pandemic during which time there may be an academic disruption². The principles provide a consistent approach by health science faculties in the development of pandemic plans and are based on themes that emerged during the Pan Flu Forum on the Role of Health Science Students held July 2006.

Principles:

- Health science students are learners who meet identified practice education learning objectives.
- Health science programs will support learning at a level commensurate with resources available (e.g. faculty, practice education opportunities, library, lab facilities, etc).
- All students, as formal learners, require appropriate supervision in the practice setting.
- If practice education is continuing during a pandemic, then students must practice within the scope of their profession at the level for which they are prepared.
- Infection risks to students and faculty supervising them in clinical sites should be minimized. All students and faculty in the practice setting must have access to appropriate protection (e.g. personal protective equipment including masks that are appropriately fit-tested, anti-virals, and vaccines) as required in legislation and workplace policy.³
- Students must be made aware in advance of an emergency situation, of the known risks and required appropriate protection associated with the delivery of care in the

¹ For the purposes of these principles, “student” refers to an individual enrolled in a medical, nursing, or rehabilitation sciences (audiology, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech language pathology) university program who is participating as a formal learner in classroom and/or practice (unpaid clinical) education authorized by the university. A citizen volunteer is an individual engaged in volunteer activities separate from academic requirements and not authorized by the university.

² The term academic disruption varies with each university. Examples include prolonged or extensive absences of faculty and/or students from the program; inability to implement the curriculum; and damage to the infrastructure of the university.

³ Wording for this principle is taken from the University of Toronto’s Influenza Pandemic Planning Guidelines for U of T Health Science Faculties. March 2008.

event of a pandemic as both a learner and volunteer. Risks include personal harm and working beyond the level for which a student is prepared.

- Experiences gained in a citizen volunteer capacity during a provincial emergency should not be considered part of program requirements or as contributing to academic credit.
- Students' choice to volunteer as a citizen is separate from their role as a health science student and will not have an effect on their academic progression.
- In the event of an academic disruption, unregulated health science students are considered citizens and may make an informed choice to volunteer in a clinical capacity during a pandemic. Learners who are regulated, such as medical residents and nurse practitioner students are required to comply with the *Regulated Health Professions Act* (1991) and the relevant profession specific acts. The government has the authority to implement the *Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act* (1990), if necessary, which may have implications for these individuals.

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