

COVID-19 as a valuable learning opportunity: reflections from a public health placement at South Australia's Department for Health and Wellbeing during the pandemic

Joel Ern Zher Chan^{1,2}

¹Adelaide Medical School, Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences, University of Adelaide, South Australia, and ²Department for Health and Wellbeing, South Australia, Australia

Background: Most medical students do not receive much public health exposure during their medical education, both in the form of theoretical teaching or practical placement experiences. At the University of Adelaide, students can choose to undertake a public health elective during winter school in addition to limited lectures with public health focus, but there was not much opportunity for placements in public health prior to COVID-19. Following the interruption of clinical placements during the peak of the pandemic in South Australia, a modified placement structure when these resumed saw the introduction of a 12-week public health placement at the Department for Health and Wellbeing for final year medical students, allowing the author to volunteer for this placement¹.

Aim: This article reflects on the author's immersive experience at the Department for Health and Wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic and briefly describes the Department's services along with how it fits into the broader COVID-19 response.

Reflection: During this 12-week public health placement, the author was fortunate to be able to work with South Australia's Chief Public Health Officer and her deputies in various work streams, personnel from various functional units within SA Health, as well as other governmental and non-governmental agencies. These include the State Control Centre (Health), Communicable Disease Control Branch, Health Protection and Licensing Services, Office of the Chief Medical Officer, Office of the Chief Pharmacist; South Australian Police, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Department of Education, Department for Transport and Infrastructure; Adelaide Oval Stadium Management Authority and Multicultural Communities Council of SA. The placement afforded opportunities to participate in work such as the recommencement of sport leagues with spectators at the Adelaide Oval², setting up of a pilot for opportunistic COVID-19 swab collection among symptomatic pharmacy clients³, various aspects of the repatriation operation and mandatory quarantine⁴, outbreak investigations, management and reporting⁵, etc. Valuable outcomes of the public health placement include an improved understanding of public health principles that underpin health promotion and disease protection, both in 'ordinary' times as well as in the midst of a novel pandemic; and attaining insight into underlying health systems that enable health delivery, including for people of other cultures and for Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander people and communities. Observation and participation in placement activities like synthesizing published literature and grey literature, attending stakeholder consultations and site visits, project planning, delivery and evaluation allowed for acquisition of transferrable skills in various areas including evidence-based medicine, effective communication and rapport building, data and statistical analyses, interprofessional learning and multidisciplinary collaboration.

Conclusion: Public health placements can impact medical graduates' understanding and passion on health and society and their role as health advocates. Both of these are included in the Australian Medical Council's Graduate Outcomes statement. Public health placements are therefore worthwhile pursuing.

Acknowledgement

The presenting author would like to thank Dr Robert Hall for his mentorship and for inspiring the the pursuit of the 2020 John Snow Scholarship. The presenting author acknowledges Dr Emily Kirkpatrick for reviewing the manuscript for submission to the *Australian Medical Student Journal* for publication, and to The Royal Australasian College of Physicians as part of the 2020 John Snow Scholarship. The presenting author would like to thank Dr Marianne Gillam for her valuable comments on this abstract. The presenting author acknowledges staff and other personnel at SA Health and other agencies, as further detailed in the manuscript¹.

References:

1. Chan JEZ. COVID-19 as a valuable learning opportunity: reflections from a public health placement at South Australia's Department for Health and Wellbeing during the pandemic. *Aust Med Stud J*. Manuscript accepted for publication. 2020.
2. Chan JEZ, Lee A, Lease C, Spurrier N. Recommencement of sport leagues with spectators at the Adelaide Oval during the COVID-19 pandemic: planning, experience and impact of a globally unprecedented approach. Manuscript submitted for publication. 2021.
3. Smith M. COVID-19 tests at chemists trialled to boost number of South Australians getting checked. *The Advertiser*; 2020 [23 July 2020]. Available from: <https://www.adelaidenow.com.au/coronavirus/covid19-tests-at-chemists-trialled-to-boost-number-of-south-australians-getting-checked/news-story/c6f206cf93906764f54b440942e82800>
4. Meena S, Chan JEZ, Phan TV, Butenko S, Upton L, Hurley J, et al. Repatriation operation in South Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic: initial planning and preparedness. Manuscript accepted for publication. 2021.
5. Communicable Disease Control Branch COVID Operations Team. COVID-19 Transmission in the Peppers Waymouth Hotel, Adelaide, November 2020. Adelaide: Department for Health and Wellbeing, Government of South Australia; 2021. Available at: <https://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/public+content/sa+health+internet/about+us/reviews+and+consultation/covid-19+transmission+in+the+peppers+waymouth+hotel+adelaide+november+2020>.