

SPECIAL ISSUE

Studying Physiotherapy during COVID-19 Pandemic: A UKM Graduate's Reflection

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No one in their right mind had thought that part of his or her journey in gaining knowledge would take a 360-degree turn. The whole world was struck with the emergence of novel Corona Virus 2019 (n-Covid 19). On 11th March 2020, World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as global pandemic (www.who.int). Realizing this crucial situation, Malaysia's Government decided to enforce the first Movement Control Order (MCO) starting March 18th ending May 12th, 2020. Let's jump back to that time, shall we? I am in my 3rd Year 2nd semester (or semester 6 out of 8) in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). My main concerns at that time: industrial training both local and overseas, medical, paediatric and surgery postings, and starting my final year project journey. Exactly a week before the MCO was enforced, our supposedly posting hospital at that time, Hospital Kuala Lumpur (HKL), did not accept our placement because they were busy handling COVID-19 cases, and we were scattered throughout Peninsular Malaysia to complete our posting as one of the requirements for each subject. But this idea was later scrapped out since the whole nation was enforced with MCO at that time.

Alhamdulillah, I managed to get back to my hometown 2 days before MCO was enforced. The first few days, weeks or I would say month were kind of respite for me. Well, we got to 'rest' until we don't know when (at that time) – my first full Ramadan at home after 3 or 4 years of not being able to do so and just being happy with this 'selfish temporary happiness' with my family around. Official academic calendar only resumed after 1½ months to 2 months post MCO. Obviously at that time we were still at home, learning online. Our supposedly placements were cancelled for that semester and evaluation method was changed, OSCE was done online but not live and yes, lots and lots of looking at screen for study purposes. Honestly, I felt touched for the first time when I saw one of our therapists conducting her teaching online on HUKM gym. Maybe I miss them: the environment, the opportunity to touch patients, the people and more.

Indeed, it is one of the favours that God had given to us previously but we selfishly took it for granted. Doing OSCE online, was a full-day headache for me. We were given 3 questions at 9 am in the morning and needed to submit before the midnight. Yes, you had A LOT of time to prepare and everything, but the 'burden' stayed with you until you clicked submit and verified your video had been successfully submitted. This headache lasted for 3 weeks as we did our OSCE during weekend and we needed family members to 'act' as the patient. Compared to previously done OSPE and OSCE, although more nerve-wrecking, but it only lasts for half a day, 3 days consecutively. I guess OSCE online is not a thing for me. Oh yeah, our overseas industrial training was cancelled, and local industrial training was pushed to next year. I'm beyond sad at that time, that's it. Hope that the next batch would be able to do so in this coming future.

Our final year did not start with a good note, to be honest. We started with one day clinical posting before another MCO commenced on early October 2020 (Hashim et al. 2021), our posting was postponed for around a month, and our classes were split into 2 groups whereby each group took turns for clinical posting and professional exam. Pros and cons? Kinda sad because we were unable to see half of our friends while also grateful as we finally got to go for physical clinical posting again. Well, you cannot get all the apples for yourself, right? Our 2nd semester of the year was also hit with another MCO in June 2021. It was also the year where I did not go back to my hometown for both *Hari Raya Puasa* and *Hari Raya Haji*. It sure felt different, at least for me. My first ever *raya* that I was away from my families, planning and managing the house with friends on how to make *raya*, *raya*. I must say, it was tiring when you needed to manage the house with only 2 manpower in the house to divide the chores: cleaning, cooking, some mini decorating etc. Only God knows my mixed feelings when I first heard the *takbir raya* and made a video call with my family. But I was grateful to have families and friends that always support me. Being a close contact individual? Happened a few times to me, my classmates, and housemates. Although frustrating, it was not the time to play victim. We needed all the supports that we can get. On the other side, quarantine period gave me extra time to focus on my research. Being in the pandemic era, the way research was conducted also changed drastically; from meeting with supervisors to collecting data face-to-face, we needed something that can be

done remotely or online. This seemed easy at first, but it was not.

Furthermore, all final year and postgraduates' students were conducting the same way of research, I would say everyone was already sick and tired of answering questions and attending interviews online, thus somehow hinders our efforts in gathering participants.

“And they plotted and planned, and Allah too planned, and the best of planners is Allah” (Qur'an 3:54)

Being a course that heavily relies on physical handling, I would say physiotherapy is least effective to be done through online; it is a hard pill to swallow at first. After been exposed to several clinical postings pre-COVID, I felt something was amiss during the initial wave of COVID-19 in Malaysia. Of course, compared to previous batches, we were already lacking one semester worth of posting. Not to mention our final year clinical hours were reduced because of this global pandemic. But, instead of whining all day, ask yourself what you can do to better improve yourself with whatever tools and access that you had. Everyone has their own struggles and that's what makes us unique in every way. Stop comparing yourself with others. Instead, the person that you should be comparing is you from the past. Progress is still a progress, even half a step at a time. Everyone's here resembles a unique piece of puzzles. The shape needs to be precise to complete the bigger picture. That's us as a profession. We need each other and every hands-on deck to further improve this profession. Whatever happens, happens. And what had happened is already a history. Whether you like it or not, it shapes you to who you are right now. The good, the bad, the in between or whatever you may called it. Don't forget to always be grateful as you are still breathing till now. You might dislike it at first, but trust me, it will not matter much in the future. In fact, it is indeed bittersweet memories, once in a lifetime kind of experience.

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