

Working in the Time of a Pandemic – an Australian experience from Junior Doctors and YURO

Despite recording low numbers of COVID-19 cases in Australia compared to worldwide figures, strict government lockdowns and restrictions challenged junior doctors both professionally and personally. Many trainees finished 2020 with the overhanging uneasiness of a light surgical logbook, due to the cancelled operations and or redeployment to other specialities. The research field endured laboratory closures whilst adapting to virtual meetings platforms. Uncomfortable personal protective equipment and social isolation became the norm in an effort to protect colleagues, patients, family and ourselves. Fortunately, Australians are now beginning to return to a new form of normality and in this piece we would like to reflect on a unique year and look forward to 2021 and beyond.

Dr McVey describes her experience working as junior urology registrar in a large tertiary hospital in Melbourne when COVID-19 first became apparent.

“The clinical year in Australia started in February, with the usual rotation of junior doctors around hospitals, units and between training grades. Although there was some growing fear of a new virus from Wuhan at this time, the first few weeks in our department felt like business as usual. We had an enjoyable roster, a varied patient ward round every morning, two clinics and approximately four theatre sessions per week, with on-call cover which was manageable and well supported. There were plenty of learning opportunities at our weekly Uro-oncology multidisciplinary and radiology meetings, which frequently included presentations from esteemed International guests.

This all came to a grinding halt in March 2020, when Australian cases started to rise and the borders promptly shut; these have remained closed until this day. The threat of coronavirus became very apparent, and its impact seeped into our everyday working life. Clinics incorporated ‘telehealth’ which at the time was a totally foreign concept, theatre lists were re-triaged to include only essential surgery and all face-to-face meetings were cancelled and converted to virtual formats. Our team divided into Group A and Group B, allowing for adequate cover for illness. I said goodbye to the prospect of honing my TURP skills, when certain ‘non-essential’ procedures were stopped, and spent many hours outside the theatre door waiting for the 20-minute anaesthetic safe aerosolising period to pass.

For Urology researchers, the cancellation of the USANZ Annual Scientific Meeting marked the beginning of a new era of conferences, with multiple meetings being transformed to virtual meeting platforms. For the Young Urology Researchers

Organisation (YURO), this meant the cancellation of our Annual General Meeting and the halting of many projects. Furthermore, interaction with colleagues and supervisors were severely limited which was difficult given the number of early career researchers we have as members.

When I compare my experience of the pandemic with my families and friends in Ireland and the UK, as well as news reporting from the rest of the world, I do appreciate living in Australia during this time. Whilst we lived through a number of strict lockdowns, we have followed a clear pathway to safety and are living a relatively normal life.

In our professional lives, meetings have stayed in the virtual formal but operating is back to normal, COVID-19 wards no longer exist and clinics are seeing patients face-to-face again.

Of course, the threat of COVID-19 is still present and its full effects will become apparent in the years to come. Particular concerns in the field of Urology include late-presenting malignancies and the backlog of surgical cases. However, the utilisation of virtual technology is here to stay. Telehealth consultations have made services more accessible for regional, rural and remote communities – particularly relevant in Australia. Similarly, virtual meeting formats allow for international conference attendance from home or work and will have a major impact in collaborative research. At YURO, we are looking to incorporate the use of our website to reach a wider audience. Urological learning material for residents and students along with a podcast series are the main projects that are being undertaken. Additionally, the return of our Annual General Meeting will hopefully provide an opportunity for in-person presentations and social interaction for our members. Despite the profound effect COVID-19 had on all aspects of life and work in 2020, we are hopeful that with a strong vaccination programme and other measures to reduce spread, the global Urology community will continue to progress through research and have the opportunity again to visit our friends overseas.

Disclosure of Interests

The authors have no relevant interests to disclose.

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