



VOLUNTARY BEHAVIOR OF STUDENTS STUDYING MEDICAL SPECIALTIES IN THE CONTEXT OF A PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT:

By training young people a range of practical medical skills and engaging them in volunteer activity, they are expected to express themselves and achieve outcomes that have an impact on their own lives and the lives of others in society.

Purpose: to determine the attitudes and motivations of students studying medical specialties who want to volunteer using their professional training received at Higher Medical School during the pandemic.

Material and Methods: A survey; Mathematical and statistical processing of the obtained data; Applying an established methodology for selection of willing and motivated students; Non-formal education.

Results: Total surveyed students 282 - the largest number are those studying the Nurse specialty (48.2%). 57.4% of study participants had experience volunteering. 52.7% would work as a volunteer with Covid-19 patients. 11% were already volunteering Covid-19 at healthcare facilities. The main reason why students are most likely to volunteer in the Covid-19 sectors is personal moral principles (49.2%). The main way students would spread information in society about the nature and principles of voluntary student work is through social networks (75.2%).

Conclusions: More than half of the respondents had experience as volunteers. Students are motivated and willing to help Covid-19 patients. Personal motivation and opportunities to improve skills and acquire new knowledge and competencies are the main reasons students prefer volunteering during a pandemic. Volunteer work has a positive influence on the professional development of students, a good impact on their professional identity creation and is essential for their future work as healthcare professionals.

Keywords: volunteer work, students, pandemic,

INTRODUCTION

Volunteering is an unpaid activity for the benefit of individuals, groups or communities. Besides being a mechanism for promoting solidarity as a value, volunteering helps to solve and overcome a number of societal problems and to respond to the needs of people or local communities. Volunteers acquire practical experience, skills and competences for personal, social, civic and professional development through organized volunteer activity.

Integrated health care is the provision of high-quality medical and social services by a team of professionals in various fields (such as nurse, doctor, social worker, physiotherapist, psychologist, etc.). These services are often provided on a part-time basis, sometimes entirely by volunteers, and can be divided into short-term and long-term. Long-term care, which straddles the line between medical and social care, is usually provided to those with physical or mental numerous problems, as well as the elderly who need assistance with their daily activities and established connection with numerous institutions.

Volunteering is an extremely important part of today's pandemic situation and in our expectant and demanding society. By organizing training young people in a range of practical medical skills and engaging them in volunteer activity, they are expected to express themselves and achieve outcomes that have an impact on both their own lives and the lives of others in society. Today's Covid-19 health care concerns require a new updated order of priorities and integrated strategies, as well as the involvement of volunteers to address them. Remembering that there are few resources (financial, human, and material) available for healthcare only serves to emphasize the necessity of using volunteers. It is extremely beneficial to use student volunteers who have medical training and a willingness to be a part of a multidisciplinary team delivering integrated health care. Involving non-medically trained volunteers in integrated health care is a practice used by non-governmental organizations for years. During the last year, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the work of volunteers became public, and society recognized their importance in delivering integrated health care to the population. All sectors of the healthcare system have been affected by a medi-

cal professional, including emergency medical services, where there is generally a shortage of physicians due to unfavorable working conditions [1]. The current situation has brought a number of deficiencies in the delivery of medical, health, and social services to Covid-19 patients, individuals in quarantine, the elderly and others with chronic diseases. Incorporating volunteers into the work of hospitals, regional health inspectorates, and individuals in need has had a positive effect on their activities and earned excellent feedback from the general public.

During the pandemic, the theoretical training of medical professionals was conducted online, and modern interactive techniques were utilized. The quality of medical specialists' professional training has improved because of the use of virtual reality [2]. The learning process also included the use of clinical simulations, which, in some ways, assisted in bridging the gap between theory and clinical practice in training [3]. During the first few months of the pandemic, the practical training in most medical universities was stopped, and one of the options for students to be able to train practically for the benefit of society was volunteer work.

The purpose of the study is to determine the attitudes and motivations of students studying medical specialties who want to volunteer using their professional training received at Higher Medical School during the pandemic.

MATERIAL AND METHODS:

1. Conducting a survey regarding respondents' attitudes and level of readiness for volunteer work.
2. Analysis of the outcomes through mathematical and statistical processing of the obtained data.
3. Selection of willing and motivated students by applying an already established methodology.
4. Non-formal education.

Location: Faculty of Medicine, Trakia University, Stara Zagora.

Period: the 2020-2021 academic year.

University Project, 2021: Integrated Health Care – Challenges and Volunteer Training.

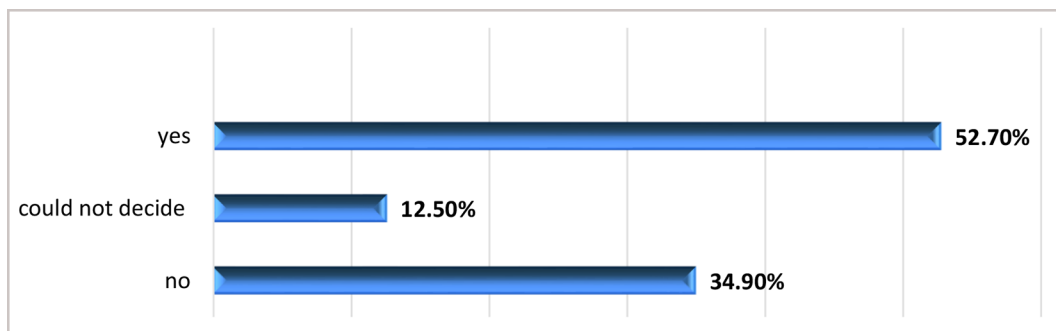
RESULTS:

Total respondents: 282 students. Among them, in order of specialty, are the following: Nurse (48.2%), Medicine (36.9%), Physician Assistant (7.4%), Medical rehabilitation and occupational therapy (5%), and Midwife (2.5%).

More than half of the respondents (57.4%) had experience volunteering and have taken part in projects organized by institutions such universities (28.6%), friends (26.3%), schools (25.3%), personal initiative (24.9%) etc.

52.7% of respondents said "yes" to the question "Would you work as a volunteer with Covid-19 patients?"; 34.9% said they could not decide; and 12.5% said "no" outright (fig. 1.).

Fig. 1. Would you work as a volunteer with Covid-19 patients?

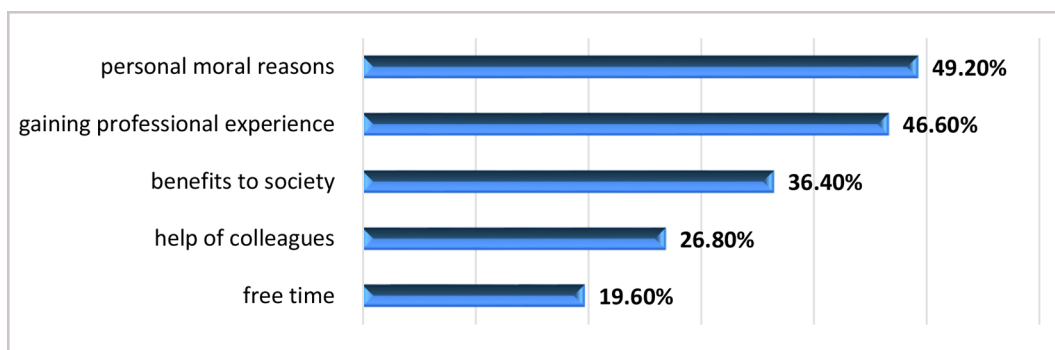


At the time of the survey, 11% of study participants were already volunteering at healthcare facilities with exposed Covid-19 sectors.

Students studying medical specialties are most likely to volunteer in the Covid-19 sectors for the follow-

ing reasons: personal moral reasons (49.2%), gaining professional experience (46.6%), benefits to society (36.4%), the help of colleagues (26.8%), and free time (classes being interrupted during the study period) (19.6%) (fig. 2.).

Fig. 2. What are the reasons to volunteer in the Covid-19 sectors?

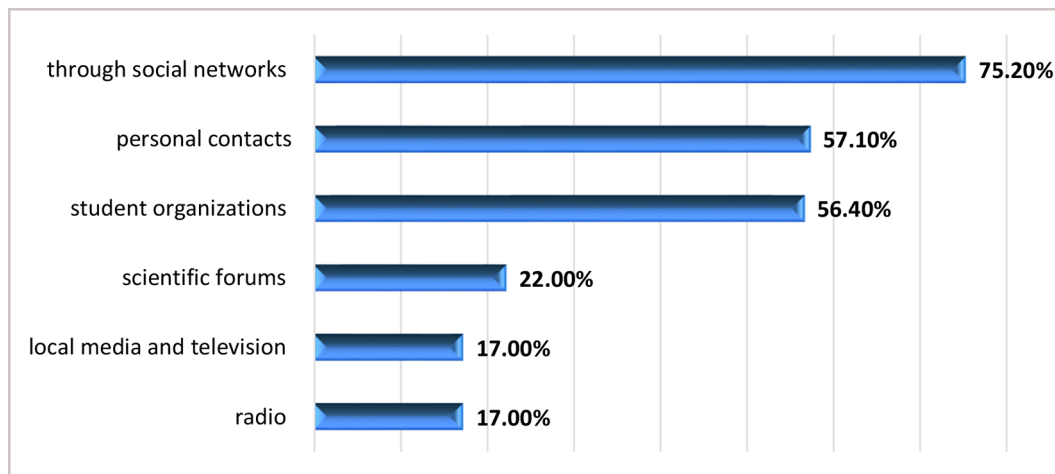


More than half of students (57.4%) report that there are volunteer programs and projects, but they do not know precisely what they are and how to contact the organizers.

To the question “How would you present information in society about the nature and principles of volun-

tary student work?” the respondents provided the following reply: through social networks (75.2%), personal contacts (57.1%), student organizations (56.4), scientific forums (22%), local media and television (17.7%) and radio (17.7%) (fig. 3.).

Fig. 3. How would you present information in society about the nature and principles of voluntary student work?



DISCUSSION:

The Covid-19 pandemic has spread quickly throughout the world, posing a serious threat to human life and health. Despite considerable progress, it was clear that global health systems were unprepared for any significant outbreaks. The global prevention and control of Covid-19 has led to a serious shortage of medical resources. The pandemic helped encourage students studying medical specialties to volunteer for the benefit of society and, at the same time, despite the fear of an unknown disease, to be socially useful, acquire new knowledge, gain new skills, and develop their medical knowledge and experience. In the process of working in the Covid-19-sectors, the students are trained to perform specific health and medical activities, thereby learning and acquiring new knowledge and the volunteer initiative among them is stimulated.

Since many years ago, there haven't been any major global pandemics comparable to COVID-19. The health services are in a difficult position due to the unknowns regarding the diagnosis, treatment, progress of the disease in people of different ages and co-morbidities. In the first months, there was a shortage of protective clothing and supplies and, to some extent, of medicine. Due to the disease's high mortality rate and contagiousness, many people choose to live in isolation out of concern for their health and lives. Fear of spreading has caused many medical personnel to leave their jobs, placing further burden on healthcare systems that already faced a shortage of doctors and nurses before the pandemic. In these difficult moments for the whole society and to help the health system, the volunteers got involved actively to control the situation. Medical students were some of the most active volunteers. Their work was the most ad-

equate because the basic knowledge and skills they had supported the process of diagnosis and therapy.

Although it is risky to interact with Covid-19 patients, the students are nevertheless willing to work in such an environment, demonstrating that they desire to perform volunteer work for the good of society and that their personal interests are not what are driving them [4]. At the start of the pandemic, approximately a third of the students studying medical specialties volunteered, and their motivation for this activity was their own moral values [5].

A systematic analysis of over 40 publications supports our research findings that student volunteering is motivated by a sense of moral responsibility (such as social commitment, duty and care), learning opportunities, self-interest, etc. Fear for one's own health and the health of loved ones due to Covid-19 itself is the reason why some students refuse to volunteer during the pandemic [6]. Most students find volunteering a positive experience, but they are also more stressed than usual because they are worried about their own and their loved ones' health [7]. However, according to other data in the literature, student volunteers had a significantly lower anxiety index and were more concerned about spreading illness to patients and relatives than they were about themselves [8].

Although, according to the rules of good medical practice, medical professions are not allowed to be practiced by persons without a diploma in the relevant specialty during the pandemic, the volunteer work of medical students allowed the health systems to respond adequately to the pandemic situation by quickly integrate them into the pandemic containment activities. Along with helping the medical doctors, the student volunteers

had the opportunity to practice what they had learned, improve their knowledge and skills, acquire new knowledge and competencies in a real work environment, and at the same time, be helpful in a time of crisis.

Most student volunteers have received support from families, friends, patients and healthcare professionals and are satisfied with their work as volunteers because they have gained professional experience and a sense of being useful. Although medical students are not yet licensed as doctors, the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that they are truly helpful to healthcare systems in times of crisis and have the potential to play a significant role in the provision of public health services in the future [9].

The students' voluntary work during the online training gave them the chance to increase the level of their training in the new situation and benefited the patients and the healthcare system. At the same time, moral principles and qualities such as altruism, contributing to society, and solidarity with practicing physicians are developed. Students studying medical specialties and working as volunteers carry out their activities not only because they support healthcare professionals but also because they are personally motivated. Voluntary work allows them to put their knowledge into practice and improve their skills and competencies [10]. Due to their high level of professionalism, the students are an important group that can contribute favorably to volunteer work, particularly in the field of health promotion [11]. Therefore, it is of great importance to encourage students studying medical specialties to volunteer.

Motivation is a major driving factor for all human activity. The mechanisms of motivation are different, but the most complex are the moral and ethical motives. Moral norms are formed during a person's entire life. For medical specialists, moral and ethical principles are leading in the personal characteristics of those chosen to work in

the field of medical science and practice. The data from our study are also confirmed by other authors. Students' motivations to help others, the chance to improve clinical skills and to work with other health professionals, along with acquiring new work-related knowledge and competencies, are leading. Developing volunteer programs for students and incorporating them into the curriculum will help develop skills essential for their future career as healthcare professionals [12]. Furthermore, the students studying medical specialties by using the knowledge and abilities acquired from their specialized studies programs can practice, gain clinical experience and improve their skills while also supporting their communities [13].

Working in clinical sectors is an extremely important factor in developing students' resilience, and volunteering during a pandemic has been found to have a positive impact on students' professional development and the construction of their professional and self-identity [14].

CONCLUSIONS:

1. More than half of the respondents in this survey had experience as volunteers and have participated in such initiatives.

2. Students studying medical specialties are motivated, and more than half of them would volunteer to work with Covid-19 patients, and not a small percentage of students at the time of the survey were already dealing with these patients.

3. Personal motivation and opportunities to improve skills and acquire new knowledge and competencies are the main reasons students prefer volunteering in a pandemic environment.

4. Volunteer work has a positive influence on the professional development of students, has a good impact on their professional identity creation and is essential for their future work as healthcare professionals.

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