

The case for a wellbeing representative in medical school

REFLECTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

It is known that medical students' and other healthcare professionals' mental and general wellbeing are frequently impacted by stressors and pressure. (1) In response, the General Medical Council (GMC) initiated a UK-wide review in 2018 on the causes of poor wellbeing, which concluded that the medical community needs to feel empowered to express concerns and speak up. (2) Subsequently, this led to development and increasing awareness of wellbeing services across universities. We are three clinical medical students who aim to provide an insight into the student-generated wellbeing initiatives which have been set up and supported by our medical school. In an era where the COVID-19 pandemic breeds uncertainty and anxiety amongst medical students, wellbeing initiatives are vital to implement, sustain and fund. We hope this reflection on our own experiences can provide other universities with a perspective on what they can implement at their respective medical schools.

Wellbeing Provision by the Medical School

The medical school offers wellbeing services via the student services centre through qualified staff, and wellbeing assistants. Consultations can be booked, or students can make use of the drop-in services during specified hours. However, in the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, remote consultations were trialled to support students. However, such consultations were limited due to technological restrictions and staff now working from home. Whilst the use of remote consultations is a useful substitute, given the circumstances, it is essential that in-person consultations are available where possible. There are various advantages to in-person consultations, such as removal of any 'barriers' like poor internet connection. In such vulnerable situations, being able to have no interruptions in conversation regarding wellbeing, can make a significant difference in supporting individuals.

A Wellbeing Representative

While the medical school provides staff-led wellbeing support, the student body also has another layer of support for student wellbeing. The ‘Wellbeing Representative’ is an elected position at the Curriculum and Wellbeing Committee (CAWC) at our university. It is a student-led committee which acts as a bridge between the staff and students. The Wellbeing Representative volunteers to become the voice for medical students’ wellbeing. Riaz, the CAWC 2019–20 Wellbeing Representative, shared his insights into the role:

“The role is varied, challenging but ever-so rewarding. Primarily my responsibilities involve organising our GMC recognised ‘FeelBright’ campaign, a series of lectures and small group sessions aimed at helping students manage mental health issues and reduce stigma. This was introduced in the early 2000s. Moreover, I oversee organising ‘Wellbeing Week’ for students from all courses which are based in the medical school. However, my role further extends to student representation, relaying concerns, and student ideas to staff groups in order to improve student wellbeing. To do this, I ensure that I am approachable to students and peers, by listening to their concerns and signpost students to the appropriate university services.”

‘FeelBright’ Campaign

The ‘FeelBright’ campaign aims to increase awareness and understanding of anxiety and depression, reduce stigma and offer a clear support pathway. The campaign is run by CAWC, with the help of other students and wellbeing staff. There are three core components to the campaign: the ‘FeelBright’ booklet, a lecture to Year 1 students, and small group teaching sessions for Year 2 students. It tries to combat students’ thinking that they will be ‘deemed incompetent’ if they seek help for anxiety, depression, or any other mental health problem.

Extending ‘Wellbeing Week’ activities into a year-round event could complement the ‘FeelBright’ campaign. Moreover, being able to deliver the campaign virtually is the plan for the 2020–21 academic year, to accommodate the continued disruption to curricula caused by COVID-19. Consistent and repetitive exposure of the message to students could have a greater impact and would help keep wellbeing at the forefront of conversation. Through conversing with the cohort, we have found that a number found the ‘FeelBright’ booklet difficult to access and it would discourage them from using it. Therefore, we raised the idea of making the booklet available through the existing University of Birmingham app. Although finance and time have proved to be hurdles, we hope that this is an avenue that could be pursued further.

Wellbeing Week

In addition to the FeelBright campaign, ‘Wellbeing Week’ is another responsibility of the Wellbeing Representative. ‘Wellbeing Week’ is a CAWC and Medical Society (MedSoc) collaboration based on the NHS ‘5 Steps to Mental Wellbeing’. (3) This week consists of activities that work towards the steps of connecting with other people, being physically active, learning new skills, giving to others and mindfulness. ‘Wellbeing Week’ has run for the past two academic years. The first was held in March 2019, a busy period in the medical school where students would be heavily focused on revision. In 2020, ‘Wellbeing Week’ was held in February, two months before end of year exams, in a time where students may feel overwhelmed with exams looming and a feeling of unpreparedness. This week aims to remind to students that there is always time to take care of their own wellbeing. This year, there were a plethora of activities which were run by fellow students, from charitable acts, to arts and exercise. Ultimately, this creates a community of students dedicated to supporting one another. Figure 1 shows a poster of the activities that were held during the Wellbeing Week in 2020.



Figure 1
Activities poster from Wellbeing Week 2020

Thus far, the Wellbeing Week has had positive responses from students (Figure 2). Although responses have been positive, it is also important to consider ways of improving the service and the awareness of the importance of wellbeing. It would be useful to extend such privileges throughout the year, by providing different wellbeing activities on a weekly basis; both in person and virtually. This enables a structure that students can implement into their schedules as a method to relieving stress from their studies. Subsequently, achievable initiatives and ideas can be trialled and implemented by the university. Given the impact of COVID-19, this is the prime time for innovation and rejuvenation of wellbeing services. Providing an online platform where students can anonymously express concerns regarding their course or exams can help overcome the logistics where some students are hesitant to speak up in person.

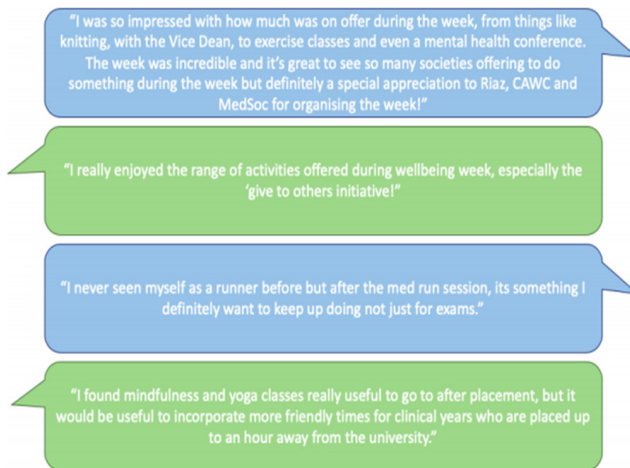


Figure 2

Feedback from Wellbeing Week 2020

Overall, as initiators and receivers of this wellbeing initiative at our university, we have found this to be a promising method of relieving stress, promoting wellbeing and minimising the stigma surrounding mental health. We believe initiatives like the above are a fantastic way for students to get together as a community to communicate and normalise their feelings.

The Evolution in the Wellbeing Representative Role

Although some initiatives are great at raising awareness at a given time in the academic year ('Wellbeing Week'), we believe it is imperative to promote wellbeing throughout the year. This is of greater importance now due to the current affairs. COVID-19 has impacted students' education greatly and with the huge uncertainty on how students will progress through the years or gain the

appropriate clinical exposure, it is likely this pandemic will impact students' wellbeing. Moving forward, there needs to be a much greater agenda in supporting student wellbeing, innovation and student-led ideas, as these are instrumental in advancing medical student wellbeing.

We believe having access to a Wellbeing Representative is extremely beneficial for the student community. Having a medium that ensures all our wellbeing concerns are heard, enables the university to tailor appropriate resources to our needs at that time. The role of the representative is to ensure every student, irrespective of their year group, is comfortable in approaching them as a link for further support. The use of regular emails, posts to relevant course pages, wellbeing posters, and events supports a welcoming environment. The Wellbeing Representative is a member of CAWC and so has only been made to cater for undergraduate and postgraduate students on the MBChB course. However, other courses are not so fortunate to have such a support structure. In response to this, 'Wellbeing Week' was launched in collaboration with the MedSoc to support other healthcare courses.

Student involvement in the organisation and provision of wellbeing services in higher education is not novel, but it has been an area of recent development. For instance, Imperial College London have University Wellbeing Representatives. (4) However, we have been unable to locate other published literature outlining other UK medical schools with an appointed Wellbeing Representative for their school. The University of Birmingham also values the wellbeing of staff, and the "Employee Advice and Listening Service" is a prime example. It is a professional service aiming to guide staff through personal or work-related problems. Staff also have access to counselling via an external provider. (5)

Despite consistently positive feedback, there is scope for improvement. At present, there is a single wellbeing representative for both undergraduate and graduate-entry medical students of all years. We believe that progressing to a representative for each year group in both groups would ensure better representation from the cohort and the programme.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, we hope that through our reflective piece, we have highlighted the importance of wellbeing amongst medical students, and how essential a wellbeing representative can be in the student community. We hope students from other unions will take a moment to equally reflect on the representation of wellbeing in their school or university and think, what can we do to try and improve this? We hope our reflection on the model, devised at the University of Birmingham, provides insight into what you could implement within your own student unions.

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