



# Returning to clinical placements

*An update for medical students*

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**msc** Medical  
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# Contents

*Click on a title to go to the page*

## **Introduction** **3**

## **Missed placements** **3**

*I missed some core clinical placements due to lockdown.  
What will happen now?*

## **Returning to clinical placements** **4 - 7**

*When will students return to clinical placements?*

*Which medical students will return to clinical placements?*

*Do I have to return to clinical placements?*

*Will I be able to travel to my placements and access  
testing if I get sick?*

*What if I have concerns about returning to clinical  
placements?*

*Are there any reasonable adjustments my medical school  
could offer?*

## **Future placements** **7 - 8**

*Will clinical placements be the same as before?*

*How will my clinical skills be assessed?*

*What do you think will happen in the future with clinical  
placements?*

## Introduction

Many of you will be thinking about how and when clinical placements might restart and medical schools are thinking about this too. In order to ensure that medical students receive all the training they need to meet the General Medical Council's [Outcomes for Graduates 2018](#), it is very likely those medical students who can return to clinical placements will do so before the Covid-19 pandemic is completely resolved. This is necessary as the NHS relies on receiving new doctors to take up F1 places each year; this will be as true next year as it is during the current pandemic.

## Missed placements

I missed some core clinical placements due to lockdown. What will happen now?

Medical schools are looking at the best way to provide opportunities for students who have missed out on clinical placements as a result of lockdown. Although it is not ideal, it may be that other parts of the curriculum, such as elective periods or Student Selected Components, need to be repurposed so that you can catch up on any missing core elements of your curriculum. The need to repurpose this time will vary across medical schools and may differ from student to student. You may also find that your holiday breaks are changed to accommodate your clinical placements.

# Returning to clinical placements

## When will medical students return to clinical placements?

Medical schools are exploring the best time to restart clinical placements. They are working with primary and secondary care providers to facilitate the safe return of medical students to clinical placements. Some medical schools may be able to restart in July whilst others may not need to restart until later in the year. This is because different parts of the NHS have been affected differently by the pandemic. Different regions of the UK and different specialties have been under more pressure than others. Additionally, medical school curricula differ from each other and term times vary between schools. However, we anticipate that most medical schools will be able to restart clinical placements in September 2020.

## Which medical students will return to clinical placements?

Ideally, clinical placements would resume as normal for all medical students, but it seems unlikely that this will happen. The most likely outcome will be a phased or gradual return of students. Final year students will take priority and be returned to clinical placements sooner. Students in clinically based years will return after that. Students in their first and second year may be the last to return to clinical placements. This will vary from medical school to medical school. Your school will work with local placement providers in both primary and secondary care to facilitate the safe return of students to clinical placements with adequate PPE provided if necessary.

## Do I have to return to clinical placements?

Yes, students who wish to progress through their course in the 2020/2021 academic year will need to complete the clinical placement requirements of their programme. It is not possible for students to meet the requirements set out in the GMC's Outcomes for Graduates without undertaking clinical placements.

It is understandable that you may be anxious about returning to placements, but it is important to bear in mind that most medical students fall into a low risk category in terms of experiencing severe symptoms of Covid-19. Medical schools also recognise that they owe you a duty of care and will therefore carry out full risk assessments for all placements they ask you to undertake.

There will be some students who are concerned about returning to clinical placements due to their underlying health conditions, vulnerable dependents, or increased caring responsibilities. If you are in this category, please speak to your medical school as soon as possible.

## Will I be able to travel to my placements and access testing if I get sick?

Yes, medical students on clinical placements are considered to be essential workers. You can travel freely to your placements. Any PPE that is required as part of your clinical placement should be provided to you by the placement provider. Should you become ill when on your clinical placement you will be eligible for testing.

For the moment, this is only true for England. The rules for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are uncertain at this time, but MSC and the medical schools in the

devolved nations strongly support that they are adopted equally across the UK.

## What if I have concerns about returning to clinical placements?

Medical schools understand that this is a stressful time for you and that you may be anxious about returning to clinical placements, especially while the pandemic is ongoing. If you are stressed and anxious about returning you need to speak to your medical school.

Student safety is paramount and medical schools and NHS placement providers will have carried out risk assessments before asking any students to return. This includes ensuring that there will be adequate supervision and that students will be able to access PPE where appropriate. Whilst there is a risk of exposure to Covid-19 in all healthcare settings medical schools will seek to avoid putting students in placements where risks are high and ensure the risks of any aerosol generating procedures that may be core to their training are minimised.

Most medical students are at low risk of severe COVID symptoms. Medical schools recognise that students with underlying health conditions, or students with vulnerable dependents, may be at increased risk of contracting the virus which would make a return to clinical placement inappropriate. Such students may wish to defer the 2020/21 academic year for this reason and medical schools will be sympathetic to such requests. You should aim to speak to your school as soon as possible if you feel it will not be possible for you to restart clinical placements.

## Are there any reasonable adjustments my medical school could offer?

While medical schools will continue to support students with disabilities or long-term health conditions to help them meet the GMC's Outcomes for Graduates, medical students need to recognise that amongst such uncertainty some students may be disadvantaged through no fault of their own. For example, should you take immunosuppressive medications or have underlying respiratory conditions it may make it inappropriate for you to return to clinical placements during the pandemic and you may need to defer to the next academic year.

## Future placements

### Will clinical placements be the same as before?

The work new graduates carry out after graduation may be different from previous years so it is only right that training will evolve to reflect this. The pandemic is forcing medical schools to rethink how they deliver learning opportunities to their students. The capacity to provide substantive teaching on clinical placements may have changed and in order to ensure that you get the learning opportunities you need to support you to meet the outcomes of your course, placements may need to be supplemented with a greater use of tools like simulation. Care itself will also have changed and you may be involved in activities such as observing virtual clinics rather than seeing patients in out-patient clinics, general practice surgeries and hospital wards.

It is also very likely that some teaching that was delivered in the form of face-to-face tutorials or lectures will be

delivered online. Medical schools are working together to produce materials that will help in the delivery of these sessions. You will need to inform your medical school if you are having problems accessing this material.

## How will my clinical skills be assessed?

Medical schools run different assessments at different stages of their courses and at different times of the year. Assessments of clinical skills will continue but the detail of exactly how and when these take place may need to change. Your medical school will keep you updated on how your assessments will be run but these, like clinical placements, may be prone to enforced change. Some students have expressed discontent with the idea of any form of summative assessment in these uncertain times. However, it is important to remember that assessment is an important means of driving student learning; in addition, it is a source of feedback on your performance and can help you focus on what you need to learn to be a better doctor.

## What do you think will happen in the future with clinical placements?

No one knows when the pandemic will be over. It is anticipated that there may be waves of infection and that some or all of the country may go into repeated periods of lockdown over the coming months. Medical schools are looking at all the different scenarios and working collaboratively to create new and innovative ways to teach and to learn medicine. Now more than ever there is a need for flexibility. Medical schools will communicate any changes that must be made and will work with you to ensure that you receive the teaching that is required.