

EMBRACING CHANGE

BY BARBARA BRODY

Despite Interruptions to Classes and Clerkships, VP&S Students Didn't Let a Pandemic Slow Them Down



In March 2020, Tyler Wen'22 had just finished morning rounds at Harlem Hospital Center when he got the news. "I received an email along the lines of 'Every student who is in a clinical setting should immediately not be in a clinical setting,'" he recalls. About 15 minutes later, during which he made a hasty apology to other residents, the in-hospital experience of Mr. Wen's pediatrics clerkship was over.

Mr. Wen—who intends to specialize in emergency medicine—was disappointed that he would have to temporarily stop interfacing with patients, though he understood why it was necessary to suspend clerkships during the height of the pandemic in New York. He just needed to decide what to do in the meantime.

With the city scrambling to mobilize a vast army of health care workers, VP&S graduated the Class of 2020 a month early, so the brand-new doctors could immediately be of service. But other students got a forced timeout: They could participate in remote electives, do research, complete service-learning projects to support health systems, or study for exams.

Unwilling to sit back while the pandemic crashed down on the city, Sarah Soo-Hoo (who will graduate in 2021 with a joint MD/MBA degree) and fifth-year medical student David Edelman quickly teamed up to create the COVID-19 Student Service Corps to provide support during the COVID-19 crisis. By early April, volunteers were fielding 1,600 hotline calls a day from New Yorkers desperate for information about the new virus.

Mr. Wen and Nick Morley'22 spent more than a month answering hotline calls. "The community hotline was initially staffed by physician assistants, but they were overwhelmed by mid-March," says Mr. Morley. "Students took four-hour shifts. We provided information about coronavirus, where to go to receive

care, CDC guidelines about what constituted as symptom, and so on.”

Mr. Wen further disseminated information about COVID-19 by lending his social media skills to Craig Spencer, MD, director of global health in emergency medicine. “Dr. Spencer, who became especially well-known after he contracted Ebola in 2014, was being inundated by COVID questions on Twitter,” says Mr. Wen. “He wanted to create an educational campaign that would address the top questions in a simplified Q&A format.”

Mr. Wen and his classmate, Saurabh Sudesh’22, sorted through the incoming questions and obtained the most up-to-date information. “Then Dr. Spencer would share the answers using his unique, approachable internet presence,” says Mr. Wen. “It was a huge team effort.”

Mr. Wen also joined forces with David Van, MD, faculty supervisor for the VP&S student emergency medicine interest group, to write a case report on the impact of psychosocial stressors in COVID-19 patients.

Mr. Morley, who plans to specialize in family medicine or infectious diseases, spent a good chunk of the spring working with Magda Sobieszcyk, MD, an HIV expert who is conducting a study on whether PrEP users who receive regular text messages and short surveys are more apt to adhere to their preventive drug regimen. While Dr. Sobieszcyk, chief of the Department of Medicine’s Division of Infectious Diseases, focused on coordinating COVID-19 clinical trials at VP&S, Mr. Morley spent months building a new database that automated the process of sending out text messages to PrEP participants based on their response to the surveys. “We no longer have to have someone manually sending out the appropriate responses, which was pretty effort-intensive,” says Mr. Morley. “Now it’s easier, so we can reach and recruit more participants.”



Nick Morley

Despite the clear value of these interim projects, Mr. Morley, Mr. Wen, and their classmates were eager to get back to their formal medical training. Clerkships for third-year students resumed in late June, and rotations have been compressed slightly so the students can stay on track to graduate in May 2022.

This summer, Mr. Morley turned his attention to his psychiatry clerkship at the Bronx VA, participating in both outpatient and inpatient care. Most outpatient care in psychiatry is done virtually, which he describes as challenging but more convenient and safer for patients during the coronavirus. Providing inpatient care after months of isolation has been “incredible,” says Mr. Morley. “Hands-on experience is as important—and as much of a gift—as it ever was.” ❖

↘ *Additional reading on COVID-19:*

- **SPRING/SUMMER 2020 COLUMBIA MEDICINE:**
<http://columbiamedicinemagazine.org/features/spring-2020/first-60-plus-days-epicenter-covid-19>
- **CUIMC NEWSROOM:**
<https://www.cuimc.columbia.edu/news/topics/infectious-diseases/covid-19>