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Resident experiences with virtual education during the COVID-19 crisis: “Zoom burnout”

Background: Due to the COVID-19 crisis, many residency programs and medical societies have adapted to social distancing recommendations by providing educational videoconferences. These videoconferences have provided a vital avenue for residents to continue their educational development and remain engaged, however, there is concern that this new paradigm may lead to over-saturation or burnout.

Methods: An anonymous 12-question survey was distributed to University of Washington plastic surgery residents. Awareness of educational opportunities, videoconferencing attendance, videoconferencing habits, and desire for future educational video conference opportunities were assessed. A modified Maslach Burnout Inventory was used to assess resident burnout from virtual conferences. Conference attendance and reasons for missing conferences were compared using paired two-tailed t-tests.

Results: A total of 24 residents were given the survey, with 100% response rate. There was a significant decrease in the total number of weekly attended video conferences over time ($p < 0.01$). Similarly, the overall number of educational conferences attended by residents has decreased since the inception of regular videoconferencing ($p < 0.01$). The mean maximum number of educational video conferences attended per week was 4.25, which decreased to 2.08 over time. Reasons for decreased attendance include clinical duties (92% of respondents) followed by symptoms of burnout, including forgetfulness (67%) and feeling fatigued by the Zoom lectures (54%); a smaller proportion of absences was associated with the belief that the lecture was not educational (25%). 79% of residents reported feeling very frequently or occasionally emotionally drained from videoconferencing. 88% of residents reported feeling burned out at least occasionally due to the number of Zoom activities. The majority (75%) multi-task or perform other activities during videoconferences and 55% are unlikely to watch the recording later if they missed it. Despite declining attendance and burnout, residents still feel that Zoom conferences are useful and educational, and 96% believe that video conferences should continue after the end of quarantine. The majority identified 1 to 2 as the ideal number of Zoom educational conferences per week.

Conclusion: Given the social distancing recommendations amidst the COVID-19 crisis, educational video conferences have become a particularly valued means of continued resident education. Specifically, virtual conferences allow access to teaching on topics by experts who are not typically locally available. However, the data in this study suggests that attendees have been viewing fewer videoconferences, largely due to what can be perceived as “Zoom burnout”. Moving forward, residents remain highly interested in continuing educational videoconferences, although quality over quantity will remain essential for sustaining the attendance and value of video conferences by preventing emotional fatigue and burnout.