

# ABSENTEEISM AMONG MEDICAL STUDENTS: A GROWING DILEMMA IN OUR MEDICAL SCHOOLS

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Students' commitment to learning courses such as Medicine is reflected by high attendance which enables them to grasp both basic and clinical subjects and equips them with adequate aptitude and skills to perform best in Medicine.<sup>1 and 2</sup> Since the COVID-19 pandemic, many medical colleges have shifted to online teaching and learning. While online classes offer convenience, they may also have nurtured the culture of decreased student engagement and participation and equally mitigated the value of a teacher. Easy access to online lectures, animations, and power point presentations could be another reason for the lack of interest in attending lectures. Students may be feeling disconnected from the curriculum or perceiving a lack of relevance in the material being taught, which might be one of the reasons contributing to their disengagement. This disengagement can be a leading cause of decreased attendance as students may not see the value in attending every class.

Absenteeism among medical students is mainly due to ineffective teaching, ill-defined curriculum, non-conducive learning environment, and inflexible timetables hampering quality learning.<sup>3</sup> Though we all claim to have successfully adopted modern-day teaching methods, in reality, medical colleges are still relying heavily on traditional lecture-based teaching methods, which are considered to be monotonous and less engaging for students. If the teaching methods are not interactive or fail to stimulate active learning, students may lose interest and choose not to attend classes. It is considered that the leadership of many medical schools has failed to engage, convince, assure, train, and equip teachers with student-centered learning methods. A mere enrollment in certificates and Master's courses in teaching and learning is presumably not helping.

An unclear curriculum may lack specific learning objectives, course objectives, a balanced workload allocation, recommended references, assessment alignment, and access to relevant materials and lesson plans. Students may become uncertain about what is expected of

them as a result, which makes it challenging for them to set priorities and schedule their attendance appropriately. A poorly organized curriculum may result in frequent schedule modifications, last-minute cancellations, or sessions that run concurrently. It could be challenging for students to remember their classes, which could lead to absenteeism. If the curriculum is not in sync with the most recent advancements and practices in medicine, students may feel that the classes are useless or without any practical value. Medical education requires both theoretical understanding and practical experience. Undergraduate students may believe that attending particular lectures is not beneficial to their learning if the educational program does not provide sufficient opportunities for active preparation, clinical rotations, or reasonable meetings. As a result, individuals might feel less motivated to regularly attend lessons, which would increase absenteeism.

Large class numbers can impair effective student-teacher relations by making it challenging for students to actively participate in discussions and ask questions. The impersonal setting of the classroom may make regularly attending lessons less interesting and motivating. If a classroom has unfavorable physical features like poor ventilation, a lack of natural light, or unpleasant seating arrangements, it may be less conducive to learning. Because of this discomfort, students may prefer to study in more comfortable environments, which could lead to a drop in attendance.

Scholarships, grants, and other financial aid programs are all options for students looking for financial support. Due to their restricted availability or lack of knowledge of these programs, students who are financially challenged might not be able to utilize these resources. If they do not receive enough financial aid, it is harder for them to attend classes. Students from financially challenged households could have additional duties or obligations that demand their attention and time. They might need to work or pitch in around the house to help support their families financially. They might not be able to make it to

class as a result of these competing obligations.

For students with limited financial resources, it could be challenging to get access to necessary resources including textbooks, reference books, and internet resources. These tools are essential for comprehending and following the curriculum. Without adequate access, students could find it difficult to participate fully in class, which would reduce attendance. Practical sessions are a common part of medical education, thus it is important for students to have access to certain tools and study materials. Financially struggling students might not be able to buy these supplies, which would limit their ability to participate in practical lessons and ultimately result in decreased attendance.

Absenteeism can adversely affect academic performance and low attendance can demotivate teachers also to teach with keen interest.<sup>4</sup> It is pertinent to note that the reasons for decreasing student turnout may vary depending on the specific context of the medical college and the individual experiences of the students. To address this issue, colleges can consider implementing strategies such as promoting student well-being, incorporating more interactive teaching methods, improving curriculum relevance, rigorous training programs for teachers, and providing support systems to help students manage their workload effectively. We need to incorporate our cultural norms into Westernized learning techniques and ascertain the mandate of teachers by empowering them with firm and meaningful assessment authority. It should be crystal clear whether to treat them as school-going or professional students. An occasional bit of both is confusing for both the students and the faculty.

The curriculum should be designed with clear and measurable learning outcomes, up-to-date content, and a balanced integration of theoretical and practical components. Incorporating interactive teaching methods, providing access to relevant resources, and ensuring proper guidance and support can help enhance student engagement and reduce absenteeism in medical colleges

in Pakistan. Creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment involves providing necessary infrastructure, implementing student-centered teaching approaches, enhancing faculty-student interactions, and offering support services that cater to students' academic and emotional needs. By improving the learning environment, educational institutions can help reduce absenteeism and promote student success in medical education in Pakistan.

Addressing these financial discrepancies is crucial to ensure equal opportunities for all medical students. Implementing policies that provide financial assistance, scholarships, or subsidized education for economically disadvantaged students can help mitigate these issues. Additionally, raising awareness about existing financial aid programs and offering support services tailored to the needs of financially struggling students can contribute to improving attendance rates and overall academic success.

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