

## Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on Saudi medical students' career choices and perceptions of health specialties: findings from a national cross-sectional study

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**Abstract:** Background: The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating effect on people across the globe. Its impact on medical students' education has also been profound. Here, we aimed to comprehensively determine the nature of this impact on their choice of specialty. Method: A cross-sectional study was conducted among medical students in Saudi Arabia during the pandemic from May to June 2021. Data collected from 1984 medical students were analyzed. Results: Of the total sample, 810 (40.8%) respondents reported that the pandemic could affect their choice of specialty, with the majority being in the third year (n=235). Across all class-years, the most common reason chosen was the inability to explore specialties of interest (n=539, 66.5%). Another reason cited was the inability to support residency application (n=175, 21.6%). A majority expressed concerns regarding enrollment in research activities. As high as 17.9% (n=356) of the respondents admitted that they were trying to avoid specialty with frontline exposure to COVID-19, while 353 students (17.8%) were considering local training programs only. While examining certainty levels, of the 1174 (59.2%) students who reported not being affected by the pandemic, 924 (78.7%) had a weak certainty level. The majority were in the third (54.8%, n=342) and fourth years (44.8%, n=212). Conclusions: This study is the first attempt to thoroughly examine the effect of COVID-19 on medical students' choice of specialty. This effect unfurled in 4 out of 10 surveyed students. Many students reported concerns regarding the inability to explore medical specialties and the inadequacy of obtained clinical knowledge. However, a subsidiary effect was observed among students who were assertive about their choice of specialty. These findings shed new light on the exigency of establishing a career counseling framework designed to meet individual learner needs, thereby galvanizing their morale. Further research could explore the long-term implications of the Saudi Commission for Health Specialties Matching System.