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COMMENTRY:

**ISOLATION OF COVID-19 CONFIRMED RESIDENTIAL STUDENTS AT THE SCHOOL OF
MEDICINE & HEALTH SCIENCES, UNIVERSITY OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA**

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COMMENTARY:**ISOLATION OF COVID-19 CONFIRMED RESIDENTIAL STUDENTS AT THE SCHOOL OF MEDICINE & HEALTH SCIENCES, UNIVERSITY OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA****SHALON TAUFA**

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The School of Medicine & Health Sciences (SMHS) is one of five Schools at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG). It is situated as a separate campus on its own near the Port Moresby General Hospital (PMGH) where most of its students attend practical clinical sessions. In the SMHS just under a thousand students are registered to study Medicine (MBBS), Dentistry (BDS/BOH/DDT), Imaging Science (BMIS), Medical Laboratory Sciences (BMLS), Pharmacy (BPharm), Public Health, Nursing, and postgraduate studies. More than 50% of these students reside on campus in the student dormitories, thus accessing all the facilities provided on campus. There is a student mess hall which provides three meals a day for all boarding students. There is also a clinic on campus for both students and staff members.

COVID-19 has affected people all over the world. The first positive case of COVID-19 among the students at the SMHS prompted a

very quick response from the administration and staff in charge of the student clinic. The student was taken straight to the allocated isolation facility in the city of Port Moresby. He did not show any symptoms of respiratory illness and was then transferred back to his room on campus after a few days. Whilst he remained in isolation, several rooms around his had to be evacuated and he was the only student who used the bathroom facilities in that wing of the dormitory. His friends collected his food from the mess three times a day and left it outside his door.

This event then paved the way for a better option which was decided by the COVID-19 staff committee and approved by the Executive Dean of the SMHS.

One of the self-contained units (Yaram block) of the dormitories on campus was emptied and cleaned out in preparation for isolation of COVID-19 positive students. A protocol for isolation of COVID positive students who were

symptomatically stable was also written out and kept in the clinic on campus.

PROTOCOL FOR ISOLATION OF COVID – POSITIVE STUDENTS.

SMHS Staff and Student Clinic UPNG.

1. Record details of the student – (most of this information will be in the students' chart) Name, ID number, gender, phone number, resident or non-resident student, symptomatic or non-symptomatic, types of symptoms (if symptomatic), duration of symptoms.
2. If the student is not residing on campus, then he/she can isolate at home. If the student is a resident on campus, then they will need to be moved to the isolation facility at Yaram blocks (one of the married quarter facilities).
3. Call SMHS student warden and notify her of the student. Give her the student's name and number.
4. The student warden will then arrange for the room and notify the student.
5. While the student is in isolation, SMHS clinic staff need to check on him/her regularly to make sure he/she is ok.
6. Medical Officer in charge will notify the students' lecturers of the isolation.
7. The student in isolation must not leave the facility for at least 10 days. He / She must provide a list of close contacts to be tested if they are showing any signs/symptoms.
8. The isolated students must have close friends who will bring their food to them.
9. By the 9th day of isolation, the student should ideally be retested for COVID-19. However, it also depends on lab facilities. If the student is not showing any more symptoms and is well, then they can be allowed to go back to their rooms on day 10.

This arrangement worked very well for residential students that tested positive for COVID-19. Several issues that affected the students during their isolation period were noted by the clinic staff. In the first few days, the students were calm and content and kept themselves busy with schoolwork. However, before the allocated ten days were up, they developed several issues. Not everyone who was isolated had the same issue.

Some of them became restless and frequently called a medical officer to ask if they could move back to their rooms. They became lonely and felt suffocated in the same enclosed environment. The usual form of communicating with others was via mobile phones and when the phone credits or data ran out, they became so alone. The issue of food also became a problem. Usually, their close friends would collect food for them from the student mess and deliver to their doorstep for each meal. If the friends did not arrange among themselves the schedule of delivery, or if they became too busy, or simply

forgot, the food was not delivered to the isolated student and they would go hungry.

Some students could not cope with missing ten days of classes during those isolation periods. One student had to withdraw and repeated the academic year. The undergraduate programs have classes/seminars and practicals occurring on most days from 8am to 4pm and when a student misses just one day, they have a lot to catch up on. Missing ten days resulted in missing an enormous amount of work. The mental stress that resulted from all these issues was immense. Many of those students who were

isolated were assessed by the medical officers and then released back to their rooms even before the full ten days isolation was up.

The isolation protocol was adequate for the resident students in SMHS. However, the effects it had on the students mental and physical health were too much.

It was a relief when the isolation order from the government was relaxed so that the asymptomatic COVID positive students did not have to be isolated anymore. They still, however, continued to practice social distancing and proper sanitizing habits.