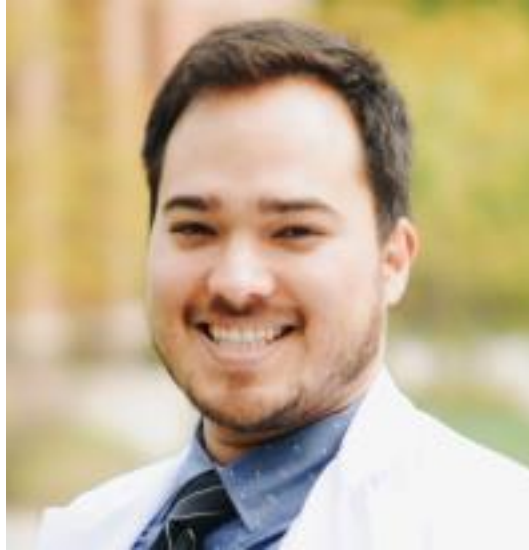


COVID-19 and the CSPE

Podiatry students look for relief during the pandemic.

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This tumultuous year has brought a wide array of complications and concerns within our communities, and its effects have reached worldwide and will probably linger for years to come. More than ever, we are experiencing a heightened sense of fear, social discord, and hatred; however, we have a unique opportunity to rise to the occasion and confront these challenges with compassion as well as rationality. The American Podiatric Medical Students' Association (APMSA), with the assistance and guidance of the American Podiatric Medical Association (APMA), has been working tirelessly to help address and alleviate the concerns of students. It is clear that we have entered uncharted waters, and will need all hands on deck to help weather the storm. Our podiatric medical students are currently facing a crisis head on, and ask that you stand with us in solidarity.

All practicing podiatric physicians are aware of the existence and challenges that the Board exams present. However, not all are acquainted with the American Podiatric Medical Licensing Examination (APMLE) Part II Clinical Skills Patient

Encounter (CSPE) portion. The CSPE was only recently introduced to podiatry, with the first class ever to take it being the class of 2015. It's safe to say that the majority of current practicing podiatrists have not taken this exam, nor ever will.

The CSPE consists of 12 simulated patient encounters that are used to assess a student's "proficiency in podiatric clinical tasks needed to enter residency." (1) All 500+ 4th year podiatric medical students must travel to Conshohocken, Pennsylvania for the in-person exam. Most students do not live near Conshohocken. You can imagine the many COVID-19 related difficulties and concerns that many students have with an exam that requires them to travel (utilizing planes, trains, public transportation, etc.) as well as seek accommodations in a state that still is prohibiting large indoor gatherings of 25 or more. (2)

In June, the APMSA released a letter to the National Board of Podiatric Medical Examiners (NBPME) requesting that the CSPE examination be cancelled for this year. (3) The letter outlined five (5) major concerns that students have should the exam be conducted. In addition, APMSA included survey results in which 95% of students believe that the exam should be cancelled. (3) The five outlined concerns and brief overviews are listed below.

1. The impact of CSPE exam on the cohort - Should there be a rise in COVID-19 infections and deaths, we may find ourselves in the unprecedented situation where half of the Class of 2021 has taken the examination and half are unable to do so, creating an unnecessarily stressful situation.
2. The impact of CSPE exam on physical health - While I have no doubts that the NBPME can assure us that the exam itself can be taken safely and reasonably, they cannot guarantee the safety of the students during their travels and accommodations. "Over 85% of respondents indicated they are concerned about their safety and the safety of others, should they be required to take the CSPE exam." (3)
3. The impact of CSPE exam on completing clerkships - Many clerkships across the nation are already closing their doors to students, severely impacting their education and training. Should a student contract COVID-19 or be mandated to quarantine prior to a clerkship due to travel to the CSPE exam, this further accentuates the problem of decreased education.
4. The impact of CSPE exam on mental health - "The anxiety of possibly infecting loved ones keeps students from seeing friends and family, going grocery shopping, or engaging in outdoor activities. Staying indoors has robbed them of their regular

outlets, and many have complained about the inability to access their usual mental health counselors during this pandemic. Forcing students to travel during a pandemic will undoubtedly have negative consequences on their mental health." (3)

5. The impact on personal finances - We all know that the majority of students struggle financially during medical school and beyond. The pandemic has made a fragile financial situation even worse. The policy changes dictating flight, ride shares, and lodging have made travel this year especially expensive, aside from taking into account any mandatory quarantine periods in respective states following travel.

The contents of the APMSA letter and student concerns were so compelling that the APMA, Florida Podiatric Medical Association (FPMA), California Podiatric Medical Association (CPMA), Pennsylvania Podiatric Medical Association (PPMA), and American Association of Colleges of Podiatric Medicine (AACPM) sent letters requesting the cancellation of the CSPE. With such overwhelming evidence and support, surely the NBPME could not ignore these valid concerns.

After waiting nearly a month for any response from NBPME, they released a statement of their own outlining changes in protocol, a delayed exam schedule, and the option for the Class of 2021 to take the examination during residency, while simultaneously failing to address many of the concerns that APMSA, APMA, and other major organizations have raised. These conclusions are not surprising - the suggested protocol changes were already put in place by the National Board of Osteopathic Medical Examiners (NBOME), (4) and the delay was inevitable with the recent spike in COVID-19 cases across the United States. While a lot of thought went into this decision, it highlights a failure of the NBPME to rise up to the occasion.

As students are concerned about cancelled clerkships, changes to the interview process, and their ability to secure a residency, they are now left to choose between taking the exam during an international pandemic or taking it during their residencies. While the NBPME may feel this would help alleviate pressure, it has proven the opposite; students are unaware of where they will be geographically in one year, and are concerned about how much time during the beginning of a residency year will be taken out for this. If the exam, as described by the NBPME, is meant to test for skills necessary to start residency, then it seems contradictory to administer the exam during that period of time.

Cancelling the exam and working to removing it as a licensing requirement are not unprecedented. In its short life span, the CSPE was already cancelled once, for the Class of 2016. At that point, there was no international pandemic nor a bevy of national podiatric organizations requesting the cancellation; instead, the examination was changing administrators from the NBME to the NBOME. While cancelling the examination may seem extreme, this would simply follow suit of our MD counterparts who have cancelled their corresponding exam for the next 12-18 months. (5) For a group that has strived so long to attain parity, it is almost satirical that we cannot so much as achieve the same compassion and concern for our students.

The NBPME has not released their rationale behind the decision, nor has it opened a dialogue with students about their concerns. Instead of inviting the APMSA or a student liaison to the CSPE conversation, it has instead decided to release a statement with apparently no consideration for those it would impact. The lack of communication, understanding, or concern being exhibited by some of the stakeholders of our field is disheartening. This is the time we should be coming together for common sense solutions; instead, it feels as though we are arguing among ourselves.

Those in decision-making positions need to consider what they are working for; is it to educate a cohort of professional, compassionate physicians? If so, they have a very strange way of showing it. Along with the physical examination, the CSPE is meant to assess a student's ability to communicate and empathize with patients. It is ironic, then, that the NBPME has decided to ignore the concerns of students and national organizations and instead announce changes to the examination one month prior to the start date. Should the empathy of our field not start from within?

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