# The Impact of COVID-19 on Rehabilitation Interns (OT and PT) and Their Internship Experience During the Pandemic in Saudi Arabia

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# Abstract-

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted the internship experiences of occupational therapy (OT) and physical therapy (PT) interns in Saudi Arabia. This article examines the impact of these disruptions on the interns' education, clinical skills, and transition to professional practice. The challenges faced during their internships, such as reduced clinical exposure and increased reliance on virtual learning, are discussed. Strategies for mitigating the long-term effects of these disruptions on new graduates are also explored. By understanding these impacts, educational institutions and healthcare facilities can better support interns and recent graduates in adapting to the evolving healthcare landscape.

# Keywords: COVID-19, internship, occupational therapy, physical therapy, rehabilitation, Saudi Arabia, clinical education, virtual learning, professional transition

# Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges for healthcare education, particularly for rehabilitation interns in occupational therapy (OT) and physical therapy (PT). In Saudi Arabia, the disruptions caused by the pandemic have significantly affected the internship experiences of these interns, impacting their clinical education, skill acquisition, and readiness for professional practice [1]. This article explores the challenges faced by OT and PT interns during the COVID-19 pandemic and the effects of these challenges on their transition to practice after graduation.

# **Challenges Faced During Internships**

#### Reduced Clinical Exposure

One of the most significant challenges faced by OT and PT interns during the COVID-19 pandemic was the reduction in clinical exposure. Hospitals and clinics limited patient interactions to minimize the spread of the virus, leading to fewer hands-on learning opportunities for interns [2]. This reduction in clinical hours affected the interns' ability to practice and refine their clinical skills, potentially impacting their competence and confidence as they transition to professional practice.

#### Increased Reliance on Virtual Learning

With the onset of the pandemic, educational institutions shifted to virtual learning to continue delivering educational content [3]. While online platforms provided theoretical knowledge, they could not fully replicate the hands-on experience and patient interactions crucial for OT and PT training [4]. The lack of practical, real-world application posed a significant challenge for interns, who rely on direct patient care to develop essential clinical skills and judgment.

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#### Emotional and Psychological Stress

The uncertainty and stress associated with the pandemic also affected the mental health of rehabilitation interns. Concerns about personal health, the health of family members, and the overall impact of the pandemic on their education and future careers added to the emotional burden [5]. This psychological stress could affect their learning outcomes and readiness to enter the workforce.

#### Adaptation to New Health Protocols

Interns had to quickly adapt to new health and safety protocols, including the use of personal protective equipment (PPE), infection control measures, and telehealth practices [1]. While these adaptations were necessary, they added an additional layer of complexity to the interns' learning experience. The rapid implementation of telehealth, in particular, required interns to develop new skills in remote patient management and communication.

#### **Patterns Observed in Intern Perceptions**

Feedback from OT and PT interns during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed several common themes:

- Adaptability and Resilience: Interns demonstrated remarkable adaptability and resilience in the face of unprecedented challenges [2]. They quickly adjusted to new learning modalities and health protocols, showcasing their ability to manage change effectively.
- Need for Enhanced Support: Interns expressed a need for enhanced support from educational institutions and clinical supervisors [5]. This support included guidance on navigating virtual learning, emotional support, and additional resources to compensate for reduced clinical exposure.
- Value of Telehealth: While initially challenging, many interns recognized the value of telehealth as a viable mode of delivering care [1]. They acknowledged the importance of gaining proficiency in telehealth practices, which are likely to remain a significant component of healthcare delivery post-pandemic.

#### **Strategies for Mitigating the Long-Term Effects**

#### Enhanced Virtual Learning Platforms

Educational institutions can invest in advanced virtual learning platforms that offer interactive and immersive learning experiences [3]. Virtual simulations, augmented reality (AR), and virtual reality (VR) can provide realistic clinical scenarios, allowing interns to practice and refine their skills in a controlled environment. These technologies can bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, enhancing the overall learning experience.

#### Increased Support and Mentorship

Providing increased support and mentorship for interns is crucial to help them navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic [1]. Regular check-ins with clinical supervisors, access to mental health resources, and peer support groups can provide the necessary emotional and professional support. Mentorship programs can also offer guidance on adapting to new healthcare practices and building resilience.

#### Incorporation of Telehealth Training

Given the rise of telehealth during the pandemic, incorporating telehealth training into the curriculum is essential [1]. Interns should receive formal education on telehealth platforms, remote patient assessment, and effective communication skills in a virtual environment. This training will prepare them for future practice, where telehealth is expected to play a more prominent role.

#### Flexible Internship Models

Developing flexible internship models that combine virtual and in-person learning can help mitigate the impact of reduced clinical exposure [2]. Rotational schedules, where interns alternate between virtual simulations and in-person clinical experiences, can ensure that they receive a well-rounded education. These models can be tailored to accommodate any ongoing restrictions while maximizing learning opportunities.

#### **Case Studies and Success Stories**

Case Study 1: Adapting to Virtual Learning

Background: During the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, a rehabilitation program at a major Saudi Arabian university transitioned its OT and PT internships to a virtual format. The program aimed to maintain educational continuity while adhering to safety protocols.

Implementation: The university invested in advanced virtual simulation software that mimicked real-life clinical scenarios [3]. Interns participated in virtual case studies, interactive webinars, and online discussions with clinical supervisors. The program also incorporated AR and VR modules for hands-on practice of therapeutic techniques.

Outcomes: Interns reported high levels of engagement and satisfaction with the virtual learning experience [3]. While they acknowledged the limitations compared to in-person training, the interactive and immersive nature of the virtual simulations helped them develop critical thinking and clinical reasoning skills. The program's success demonstrated the potential of virtual learning platforms to complement traditional clinical education.

Analysis: This case study highlights the effectiveness of advanced virtual learning platforms in maintaining educational standards during disruptions [3]. By investing in technology and innovative teaching methods, educational institutions can provide a comprehensive learning experience even in challenging circumstances. Case Study 2: Integrating Telehealth in Internships

Background: A rehabilitation hospital in Riyadh integrated telehealth into its internship program to continue providing patient care while minimizing COVID-19 exposure risks. The initiative aimed to equip interns with essential telehealth skills and ensure the continuity of their clinical education.

Implementation: Interns received training on telehealth platforms, remote patient assessment, and virtual communication techniques [1]. They conducted supervised telehealth sessions with patients, focusing on assessment, treatment planning, and follow-up care. The hospital also facilitated regular debriefing sessions to discuss challenges and share best practices.

Outcomes: Interns gained valuable experience in telehealth, developing skills that are increasingly relevant in modern healthcare [1]. They reported increased confidence in managing remote patient interactions and recognized the potential of telehealth to expand access to rehabilitation services. The initiative also enhanced the interns' adaptability and problem-solving abilities.

Analysis: This case study illustrates the importance of integrating telehealth into clinical education [1]. By providing hands-on telehealth experience, institutions can prepare interns for the evolving healthcare landscape and ensure they possess the necessary skills for future practice.

# Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the internship experiences of OT and PT interns in Saudi Arabia [1,2]. Despite the challenges, interns demonstrated resilience and adaptability, embracing new learning modalities and healthcare practices. By investing in advanced virtual learning platforms [3], providing enhanced support and mentorship, incorporating telehealth training [1], and developing flexible internship models [2], educational institutions and healthcare facilities can mitigate the long-term effects of these disruptions. These strategies will ensure that future graduates are well-equipped to navigate the evolving healthcare landscape and deliver high-quality care.

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