CONTENTS

From the desk of the Editor

Main Article

Different Faces of Sinonasal Mass Lesions
Devika T, Shubha P Bhat, Vadisha Srinivas Bhat, Rajeshwary Aroor, Satheesh Kumar Bhandary B, Gautham MK, Samatha KJ

Complications of Thyroidectomy in Hashimoto Thyroiditis vis-à-vis Benign Goitres
Savita Lasrado, Anita Aramani, Aishwarya Hegde, Kuldeep Moras, Cimonad Sduouca

Study on Satisfaction Levels among Hearing Aid Users in Gangetic Plains
Bipin Kishore Prasad, Abhijit Basu, Ajay Kumar Rai

In Saving the Canal Wall, can MERI and Otoendoscopes Help Take a Call?
Titas Kar, Diptanshu Mukherjee, Shaoni Sanyal, Saumendra Nath Bandyopadhyay

The Use of Serial Non EPI DWI MRI Scans to Determine the Growth of Cholesteatoma
Wendy K Smith, Leena Naidu, Hemanth Kowdley Subrahmanyam

Outcome of Post-Operative Mastoid Cavity Obliteration with Autologous Adipose Tissue
Bipin Kishore Prasad, Krishna Kamal Ghosh

Local Bupivacaine Infiltration to Reduce Pain after Tonsillectomy: A Low Cost Approach
Rakesh B S, Bharathi M B, Thanzeemunisa U, Kumar Shankar De, Nitish Aggarwal

Usefulness of The Reflux Symptom Index in the Management of Laryngopharyngeal Reflux
Saai Ram Thejas, Ganganamoni Rajamohan, Sindu Mohan, Kowsalya Swarna

Alteration in Status of Olfaction amongst COVID 19 Patients: A Descriptive Study in a Dedicated COVID Hospital of Eastern India
Monoj Mukherjee, Anupam Ray, Arpita Mohanty, Sekhar Ranjan Paul

The Effect of Stimulus Rates in Chirp and Click Evoked Auditory Brainstem Response in Adults with Normal Hearing Sensitivity
Susmi Pani, Archita Sahoo, Indranil Chatterjee, Palash Dutta

Nasal Septal Perforation: Experience of Management
Selcuk Kuzu, Çağlar Günebakan

Contd.
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CONTENTS

Our Experience
Tympanoplasty for Wet and Dry Perforation: A Prospective Comparative Study
Amit Bikram Maiti, Rupam Sinha
Parapharyngeal Tumours: Our Experience in a Tertiary Care Hospital
Debabrata Das, Arjuman Parveen, Apurba Sarkar, Sk Nawazur Rahman

Case Report
Hydatid Cyst of Submandibular Region
Jyotirmoy Phookan, Pritam Chatterjee, Sritama De
Efficacy of Auditory Verbal Therapy on Listening and Linguistic Skills of a Child with Bimodal Hearing
Joyanta Chandra Mandal, Indranil Chatterjee, Suman Kumar, Shilpi Chakraborty
Foreign Body Nose: An Unusual Presentation
Ankit Gulati, Surinder K Singhal, Shashikant A Pol, Nitin Gupta
Impaled Nasopharyngeal Foreign Body
Pritam Chatterjee, V D Prasanna Kumar Vasamsetty, Chiranjib Das, Sudip Kumar Das
Communication Profile of de Lange Syndrome
Susmi Pani, Palash Dutta, Vidushi Saxena, Asif Ekbal Ansari
Acrylic Foreign Body in the Orbit: A Multidisciplinary Approach
Nikhil Rajendra Dhorje, Kshitij Dhaval Shah, Madhusudhan V, Pushkaraj Abhay Kulkarni, Renuka Anil Bradoo
Nasal Schwannoma
Surinder K Singhal, Ankit Gulati, Nitin Gupta, Mugdha Singh
Midline Nasal Tip Sinus
Nitin Gupta, Himani Gupta, Surinder Kumar Singhal
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**OFFICE BEARERS 2020-21**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dr Prabir Bose</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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The medical student community has traditionally involved themselves by assisting/supplementing the workforce in managing natural calamities, accidents, fires and even wars, while continuing with their education. However, the unprecedented global emergence of the highly contagious pandemic of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has not only restricted the scope of participation of the students in combating the situation but also threatened the basic method of medical education that shapes the quality and confidence of the budding physicians in treating the ailing patients.

As COVID-19 infection rates increased during March, 2020, and it became clear that asymptomatic persons (including the students and doctors) may carry the virus and infect others, the medical students were withdrawn from the traditional hospital-based instructional classes. Cancellation of surgeries and suspension of traditional learning sessions denied students the opportunity to learn from face-to-face contact with patients or hands-on experience using equipment/gadgets in authentic patient care environments under the mentorship of their teachers. Uncertainties fed the feeling of insecurity and anxiety amongst the students. Medical educationists all over the world experimented and implemented different educational adaptations to convert panic into resolve to fight the problem, while keeping the students engaged and on track with the curriculum-driven coursework. Innovations in medical education technology aimed at maintaining standards of quality and performance.

The perspective of medical education has changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Virtual medical education utilized the resources of digital learning management systems to reach out to the students on video communication platforms like Google Classroom, Skype, Zoom, etc. and tried to generate a classroom like experience in participation and interaction while maintaining physical distancing to keep the students safe. One Chinese medical school devised online problem-based learning techniques to complete the curricula in one session. These methods became so popular that the medical school continued with these methods in subsequent sessions too.

The clinical experience the students gather during the in-patient and out-patient rotations are considered to be invaluable. Different methods have been proposed that ranged from moving the didactic lectures forward while deferring the clinical rotations, to digital simulations of clinical situations/procedures where participants can discuss or assist in virtual team settings to develop their clinical skills.

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The pandemic catalysed greater cooperation between institutions in providing access to and sharing their teaching resources. While most of the institutions have created their platform to provide virtual education, many such institutions and professional bodies joined hands to create a repository to provide resources and educational content to the medical community, e.g., the Virtual University of Medical Sciences (VUMS) in Iran, e-learning for healthcare in the UK (e-lfh) hub of the NHS, etc. The professional bodies/associations in India (e.g., AOI, NES, IAOHNS) have conducted different instructional/lecture series and uploaded those on their websites for ready access. A number of dependable YouTube medical education channels are available with very good content. So now the students have more options to learn from the virtual platforms rather than the traditional didactic lectures. Development of resource bases have now enabled the students to choose the topics of their interest and learn it from the best teachers around the world.

The rapid spread of COVID-19 and persistence of the pandemic for a prolonged period have had serious implications for medical education. The medical educators lived up to the challenge and came out with innovative methods to make up for the scarcity of traditional teaching environment and reduced clinical exposure. Virtual medical education came into being utilising digital technologies and online platforms to give more clarity to teaching. Wider use of simulations, adaptive teaching-learning activities, greater flexibility in curriculum as also in the assessment methods appear to have transformed the medical education forever.

Suggested readings:

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