

## **Undergraduate Medical Student Transfer on Compassionate Grounds**

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**CFMS**  
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**FEMC**

Fédération des étudiants et des  
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## **Undergraduate Medical Student Transfer on Compassionate Grounds**

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### **POSITION PAPER**

In rare and extenuating circumstances, medical students may find it necessary to relocate during their medical studies and enroll in another medical school. Seven schools in Canada (NOSM, Queen's University, University of Toronto, McMaster University, McGill University, University of Sherbrooke, and Dalhousie University) do not consider students for transfer. These schools should follow the other Canadian medical schools in developing policies and procedures to consider applicants for transfer. Doing so will not only standardize policies across medical education in Canada, but contribute to improving the wellness of students for whom such a policy is imperative.

### **CONCERNS**

1. Medical students need more support in addressing personal extenuating circumstances.
2. For some students, transferring across medical schools may be the best solution for attending to personal or family problems and improving well-being.
3. Canadian medical schools fail to promote fairness and equal opportunity for students when some schools have a policy that allows for transfers into their programs based on compassionate grounds while others do not.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Each of the schools without the option to accept transfer students should implement a policy that will consider applicants for transfer on compassionate grounds.
2. Once students are admitted as transfer students, they should be given support from the administration in navigating and integrating into their new school.
3. The CACMS should consider a school's willingness to accept transfer students into its medical school accreditation standards.

## Introduction/Background

As medical students, we aim to dedicate ourselves fully to our studies, knowing that lives will one day depend on how well we train today. Despite this, unexpected circumstances may prevent us from giving our studies our full attention. Circumstances such as illness in the family, other significant familial matters, or medical needs that can only be addressed at specific locations, may place demands on our time and wellness. The guilt, worry, and helplessness that medical students may experience when they cannot be physically present during a time of personal or familial need, on top of the demands of medical school, can often be overwhelming.

Several schools in Canada should be commended for recognizing and addressing this issue. The medical schools at the University of British Columbia, University of Calgary, University of Alberta, University of Saskatchewan, University of Manitoba, Western University, University of Ottawa, and Memorial University all have some mechanisms in place to consider transfer students from other Canadian medical schools into their undergraduate programs (Table 1). These policies allow students at other Canadian medical schools, under extenuating circumstances, to apply for a transfer into clerkship. Some schools stipulate that they will only consider students into third year of study if they are in good academic standing and there are vacancies in the class, while other schools simply state they will evaluate candidates on a case-by-case basis.

The Committee on Accreditation of Canadian Medical Schools already has a framework in place to address transfers. CACMS Element 10.7 states:

“A medical school ensures that any student accepted for transfer or admission with advanced standing demonstrates academic achievements, completion of relevant prior required learning experiences, and other relevant characteristics comparable to those of the medical students in the class that he or she would join”(1).

Of the schools that do not consider undergraduate medical transfer applicants on compassionate grounds (Northern Ontario School of Medicine (NOSM), Queen’s University, University of Toronto, McMaster University, McGill University, University of Sherbrooke, and Dalhousie University, only NOSM offers an explanation, stating, “due to the integrated nature of the curriculum, NOSM cannot accept transfer students. If you are accepted to the medical school, you must complete the full 4 years of the medical program.” It remains unclear why the other schools do not have a policy to consider transfer students (2).

Although these schools may provide students with other supports through difficult familial and personal situations, such as an option to take a “leave of absence,” such support is inadequate. For example, if a family member’s health is slowly declining and the family requires the support of the student, taking an absence from school may not address the problem, and may place only further stress on the student. The best solution may be for the student to continue one’s medical education by providing support to family by living proximally to them.

## **Principles/Stance**

**1. Medical students may have stressors and difficult circumstances in their personal lives due to geography that should be acknowledged, validated, and supported by all Canadian medical schools.**

**Rationale:** Medical students may find themselves in circumstances during their schooling that predispose them to certain stressors. Living far from home is one example of a personal situation that may make it difficult to attend school if familial issues, such as a sick family member, place demands on a student's time. Many medical students in Canada attend school in different cities, or even provinces, than where their families live. At the University of British Columbia, for example, 27% of students come from outside the province (3). Medical schools across Canada should be aware that some extenuating circumstances are too great to bear without further support.

**2. A "leave of absence" policy is not sufficient to alleviate some personal/family circumstances.**

**Rationale:** While a leave of absence may be appropriate for some students in some cases, other situations that require a student to be immediately near family, appropriate medical care, etc., may not be alleviated with a leave of absence. For example, if a student requires medical care at a specific institution, and does not need to take time away from school to receive this care, all efforts should be made to accommodate this student. The student should be provided with the option to transfer to a school that will enable this student to seek appropriate medical care.

**3. A transfer policy could improve the mental health and well-being of students who use it.**

**Rationale:** According to respondents of a CMA survey, 30% of medical students have reported symptoms of burnout, 34% have experienced depressive symptoms, and 8% have had suicidal ideations in the last year (4). Although a policy for compassionate transfer would not address the mental health problems experienced by all medical students, it may have a significant impact on the students for whom it is appropriate. By helping students alleviate significant burdens, such as the inability to be near family during a difficult time, this policy has the potential to significantly impact the well-being of medical students.

**4. Canadian schools without an existing policy that allows for a transfer on compassionate grounds should implement these policies.**

**Rationale:** Currently, only eight schools in Canada will consider students wishing to transfer into their programs. When considering the impact that such a policy can have on student wellness, it is unclear why the remaining medical schools do not support such a policy. Variations in curricula are one valid concern against such a policy, but it is not clear why medical schools cannot consider applicants into their clerkships programs on a case-by case basis. If Canadian medical schools prioritize student well-being, they should ensure that students could apply for a transfer into other medical schools during extenuating circumstances, on the grounds of compassion.

## **5. Transfer policies should be consistent across Canadian medical schools.**

**Rationale:** All Canadian medical schools are accredited by the same standards with the goal of training physicians that are competent across a standard range of skills. Although medical schools differ in their pre-clerkship programming, students across Canada should be able to perform with similar competence during clerkship. It is not rational for some medical schools in Canada to accept compassionate transfers, while others do not. In order to meet equitable educational standards across Canada, each school should create a policy to allow compassionate transfers into their undergraduate programs.

### **Concerns**

1. Medical students need more support in addressing personal extenuating circumstances.
2. For some students, transferring across medical schools may be the best solution for attending to personal or family problems and improving well-being.
3. Canadian medical schools fail to promote fairness and equal opportunity for students when some schools have a policy that allows for transfers into their programs based on compassionate grounds while others do not.

### **Recommendations**

- 1. Each of the schools without the option to accept transfer students (NOSM, Queen's University, University of Toronto, McMaster University, McGill University, University of Sherbrooke, and Dalhousie University) should implement a policy that will consider applicants for transfer on compassionate grounds.**

**Rationale:** A policy at each Canadian medical school to consider a transfer into clerkship for extenuating circumstances on compassionate grounds is needed. Schools that lack such a policy should consult the policies of the schools that allow for transfers on compassionate grounds (Table 1). Schools should strive to align their policies with existing policies in order to promote fairness for Canada's medical students. Policies should take into account academic standing, reason for wanting to transfer, and class vacancies.

- 2. Once students are admitted as transfer students, they should be given support from the administration in navigating and integrating into their new school.**

**Rationale:** A concern of allowing students to transfer between medical schools is that the stress of the transfer, compounded with an already stressful situation for which a transfer is necessary, may adversely affect a student's well-being. In order to ensure that these students thrive in their new programs, the medical schools' programs should ensure that students are in communication with the administration of their medical program and are adequately supported to integrate into their school.

### **3. The CACMS should consider a school's willingness to accept transfer students into its medical school accreditation standards.**

**Rationale:** The CACMS already has an infrastructure to address what is an appropriate medical student transfer. They recognize that medical schools must ensure that transfer students demonstrate a certain level of academic achievement and character to transfer. The CACMS should consider including transfers on compassionate grounds in its accreditation standards. Doing so will promote standardization and fairness across medical schools. It will also emphasise the need to promote student well-being across Canada.

### **References**

1. Committee on Accreditation of Canadian Medical Schools (CACMS). CACMS Standards and Elements [internet]. Canada: Committee on Accreditation of Canadian Medical Schools (CACMS); 2018 [cited 2019 March 23]. 23 p. Available from: [https://cacms-cafmc.ca/sites/default/files/documents/CACMS\\_Standards\\_and\\_Elements\\_-\\_AY\\_2019-2020.pdf](https://cacms-cafmc.ca/sites/default/files/documents/CACMS_Standards_and_Elements_-_AY_2019-2020.pdf).
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4. Canadian Medical Association. CMA National Physician Health Survey [internet]. Canada: Canadian Medical Association; 2018 [cited 2019 March 23]. 31 p. Available from: <https://www.cma.ca/sites/default/files/2018-11/nph-survey-e.pdf>.

## Appendix

**Table 1:**

Medical School	Policy	Details Found on School Websites
University of British Columbia	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transfers are exclusive to third year</li> <li>• If there are vacancies in the class</li> <li>• Student is in good academic standing</li> </ul>
University of Calgary	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transfers are exclusive to clerkship education</li> <li>• There is support from the Associate Dean UME at the University of Calgary and the counterpart at the Canadian university from which the student is transferring.</li> <li>• If there are vacancies in the class</li> <li>• Student is in good academic standing</li> </ul>
University of Alberta	Generally no	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Will consider on a case by case basis</li> </ul>
University of Saskatchewan	Generally no	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requests for transfer credit or advanced standing may be considered on a case-by-case basis</li> </ul>
University of Manitoba	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transfers will only be considered on the basis of compassionate grounds</li> <li>• Transfers are exclusive to clerkship education</li> <li>• Only if there are vacancies in the class</li> <li>• Student is in good academic standing</li> </ul>
Northern Ontario School of Medicine	No	
Western University	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transfers are exclusive to clerkship education</li> <li>• If there are vacancies in the class</li> <li>• Student is in good academic standing</li> </ul>
Queen's University	No	
University of Ottawa	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transfers are exclusive to clerkship education</li> <li>• If there are vacancies in the class</li> <li>• Student is in good academic standing</li> </ul>
University of Toronto	No	
McMaster University	No	
McGill University	No	
University of Sherbrooke	No	
Memorial University	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If there are vacancies in the class</li> <li>• Student is in good academic standing</li> </ul>
Dalhousie University	No	