

Personal Day Policies at Canadian Medical Schools

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A. Rationale: Canadian Medical Student Mental Health

Research has shown that medical students suffer from high rates of psychological distress relative to age-matched peers[1], including burnout, depression, and anxiety[1-3]. Student psychological distress has been found to be associated with negative characteristics such as cynicism[4-6], an unwillingness to care for the chronically ill[7, 8], and decreased empathy[4, 6, 8]. The most common source of stress reported by Canadian medical students were study and examination[9]. While there has been an increased focus on wellness and mental health in Canadian medical schools, about 1/3 of Canadian medical students indicate that universities should be providing more mental health services for students[9]. The Canadian Medical Association has recognized the detrimental impact of mental illness on physician wellness and have released statements that call for the medical education system to “address stigma within the training environment”[10]. The Canadian Federation of Medical Students has also presented their stance on these issues in a position paper titled “Mental Health for Medical Students” [11]. In this position paper, seven principles were put forth to guide CFMS advocacy around issues of medical student mental health. The seventh principle identifies that “[a reduction in] stigma around mental illness within medical professional culture is both possible and necessary.” [11]

One important way to reduce stigma around mental illness is the implementation of personal days. Among other things, personal days provide students with a sense of flexibility to take time to partake in important day-to-day activities and take care of their mental health. Priorities may differ between an individual student and their supervising resident, staff, or educational committees. Personal days allow time off without feelings of guilt, pressure or need for explicit explanation. Not only does the existence and acceptance of personal days destigmatize any reasons behind taking time off, but also allows students a sense of control and ability to modify their training environment. In fact, the ability of a student to recognize when they may need a day off signals that said student is self-aware and able to exercise proper self-care – tools that the Canadian Medical Association believes are key to physician wellness[12]. As such, this paper will outline current personal day policies at medical schools across Canada and provide recommendations to better these policies.

B. Personal Day Definition

It is understood that many schools consider lectures and other sessions as non-mandatory and students use their own discretion to attend these sessions. For the purposes of this paper, **absences** (for a personal day or planned absence) are defined as missing any mandatory medical school curricula, rotations, or activities. Activities deemed mandatory may vary from school to school.

A **personal day** is defined as an **unplanned** absence that a medical student may elect to take for reasons other than: religious observance, physical illness, educational commitments (e.g., scientific/research presentation or conference attendance), varsity/professional athletics, compassionate leave, extracurricular representation (e.g., representing the medical school), or maternity/paternity leave. Furthermore, in this paper, personal days are viewed as absences that students can take when they recognize they are

experiencing burnout, anxiety, depression, and/or other indications that their mental health is suffering. A personal day is not necessarily defined by *urgent* mental health concerns and is viewed as an absence one can take to actively cope with the stressors of medical school and/or one's personal life. Furthermore, the scope of a personal day is not limited to physical or mental health. Personal days are inclusive of circumstances that may not be foreseeable (e.g. appointments to address financial concerns with the bank).

After extensive research, it is understood that some medical schools use the term personal day to refer to planned absences in which a student may elect to take for reasons such as those listed above. To make this distinction clear in this paper, the term **planned absence** will be used to refer to **planned** time off that a medical student may elect to take for personal reasons which might include: religious observance, physical illness, educational commitments (e.g., scientific/research presentation or conference attendance), varsity/professional athletics, compassionate leave, extracurricular representation (e.g., representing the medical school), or childcare reasons. Individual medical schools often require a minimum time period of advanced notice, most commonly 6 weeks, in order for planned absence approval. This distinction will be made clear in Tables 1 and 2 which outline the personal day policies at each school.

C. Current Canadian Medical School Personal Day Policies

i. Personal Day Policy Interpretation Methods

The information presented in this section reflects the information gleaned from the existing written personal day policies at each respective school. The process for interpreting the written personal day policies are as follows:

1. Members of the CFMS Wellness Committee provided the personal day policies from their respective medical schools to the authors.
2. Definitions for personal day and planned absences were determined to account for differences in terminology used at each school (see section B).
3. Two medical student authors read the personal day policies and used the definitions provided in section B to determine whether the information in the personal day policy met these pre-determined definitions. As these authors do not attend all by one medical school, they were able to read the policies objectively and interpret the policy based on the written information provided in the personal day policy PDF.
4. The results of the interpretation were shared and discussed with the members of the CFMS Wellness Committee at each school on the monthly conference call in August 2017. The discrepancy in how absences, personal days, and planned absences are handled compared to how absence day policies are interpreted as written were discussed. Discrepancies are expected, however, problematic. This issue of discrepancy is addressed in section D (Recommendations) and section E (Rationale for Recommendations).

ii. Pre-clerkship

Of the 15 medical schools represented by the Canadian Federation of Medical Students, all but the University of Sherbrooke-Moncton Campus[36] have written absence policies for pre-clerkship (Table 1). Amongst these schools, only the University

of Manitoba and University of Toronto have personal day policies that align with the definition provided in section B[13]. However, five of the schools that provided definitions for personal days were felt to mostly align with that of section B. All schools require students to provide notice to administration that they will be absent either in advance or retroactively. As written, only the University of Toronto has implemented a “no questions asked” policy in pre-clerkship whereby students do not need to provide a reason for taking a personal day. With regard to maximum number of personal days, 3 schools specify a maximum number. The majority of schools do not specify a clear maximum number of personal days: 3 state that the maximum is defined on a case-by-case basis, 5 did not mention or define a maximum, and 3 included personal days within the total number of absences allowed (both planned and personal).

Fourteen schools have clearly written planned absence policies for pre-clerkship. Of these schools, none have a “no questions asked” policy for planned absences. Like personal days, not all schools specify the maximum number of planned absences students are allowed: 3 schools have an established maximum number of planned absences, 5 did not define a maximum, 2 determine the maximum on a case-by-case basis, and 2 included planned absences within the total number of absences allowed (both planned and personal).

Table 1. Summary of Pre-Clerkship Absence Policies at 15 Canadian Medical Schools [13-34]

School	<u>PERSONAL DAYS</u>				<u>PLANNED ABSENCES</u>			Maximum Number of Absences (Inclusive)
	Written Personal Day Policy?	Personal Day Definition aligns with Section B?	No Questions Asked Policy? *	Maximum Number of Personal Days	Written Planned Absence Policy?	No Questions Asked Policy? *	Maximum Number of Planned Absences	
University of British Columbia	Yes	Mostly	No	Undefined	Yes	Unclear	3 per academic year	Case-by-case basis, however, generally > 10 absences
University of Calgary	Yes	Mostly	No	See Maximum Number of Absences	Yes	No	Undefined	None defined. Student required to meet with faculty after accumulating 3 absences at 1 per course
University of Alberta	Yes	Mostly	No	Undefined	Yes	Unclear	4 per academic year	Unclear
University of Saskatchewan	Yes	Mostly	Case-by-case basis	Case-by-case basis	Yes	Unclear	3 per academic year	5 per academic year
University of Manitoba	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Undefined	Yes	No	Undefined	Students are allowed a total of between 2 – 6 unapproved absences per module (the number is module dependent). This does not include approved absences.
Northern Ontario School of Medicine	Yes	No definition	Unclear	See Maximum Number of Absences	Yes	No	See Maximum Number of Absences	3 per academic year
Western University	Yes	Unclear	No	Case-by-case basis	Yes	No	Case-by-case basis	Undefined
Queen’s University	Yes	No	Unclear	Undefined	Yes	No	Undefined	Undefined
University of Ottawa	Yes	Unclear	No	See Maximum Number of Absences	Yes	No	See Maximum Number of Absences	10 per academic year

School	<u>PERSONAL DAYS</u>				<u>PLANNED ABSENCES</u>			Maximum Number of Absences (Inclusive)
	Written Personal Day Policy?	Personal Day Definition aligns with Section B?	No Questions Asked Policy? *	Maximum Number of Personal Days	Written Planned Absence Policy?	No Questions Asked Policy? *	Maximum Number of Planned Absences	
University of Toronto	Yes	Yes	Yes	3 per academic year	Yes	No	Undefined	Undefined
McMaster University	Yes	No definition	Unclear	Undefined	No	-	-	Unclear
McGill University	Yes	Mostly	No	10 full days or 20 half days	Yes	No	Depends on reason: 5 full days (10 half days) for illness and 10 full days (20 half days) for other reasons	Depends on reason: 5 full days (10 half days) for illness and 10 full days (20 half days) for other reasons
University of Sherbrooke – Moncton Campus^a	No	-	-	-	Yes	No	Undefined	Unclear
Memorial University	Yes	No definition	No	3 per academic year	Yes	No	Depends on course	Undefined
Dalhousie University	Yes	No definition.	Unclear	Case-by-case basis.	Yes	No	See Maximum Number of Absences	3 per academic year

Personal day policies in pre-clerkship year at Canadian medical schools affiliated with the Canadian Federation of Medical Students.

* “No Questions Asked” Policy refers to policies in which students do not need to provide a reason for their absence.

^a The Moncton campus of Université of Sherbrooke was voted to become a member of the CFMS in 2016 and is represented by both the Canadian Federation of Medical Students and the Fédération médicale étudiante du Québec.

iii. Clerkship

Of the 15 medical schools represented by the Canadian Federation of Medical Students, all but University of Sherbrooke – Moncton Campus[36] have written absence policies for clerkship (Table 2). Amongst these schools, only the University of Manitoba and University of Toronto have personal day policies that align with the definition provided in section B[13,14]. However, four of the schools that provided definitions of personal days were found to mostly align with that of section B (i.e., the definition of a personal day and reasons why a student may take a personal day provided by these schools closely matches that provided in this paper). All schools required students to provide notice to administration of their absence either in advance or retroactively. As written, only the University of Toronto has implemented a “no questions asked” policy in clerkship[14]. With respect to the number of personal days, 4 schools provide students with a maximum number of personal days. Similar to policies in pre-clerkship, the majority of schools do not provide students with a clear maximum number of personal days: 1 school states that the maximum is defined on a case-by-case basis, 4 have undefined maximums, and 2 include personal days within the total number of absences allowed (both planned and personal).

Thirteen schools have clearly written planned absence policies for clerkship students. Of these schools, Queen’s University and University of Toronto have a clearly written “no questions asked” policies for planned absences [14, 24]. There are a variety of ways that schools approach the maximum number of planned absences that students are allowed: 2 schools have an established maximum number of planned absences, 1 school defines the maximum based on the specific rotation, 5 schools do not specifically define the maximum, 2 schools state that the planned absences are included in the total number of absences allowed (both planned and personal), and 1 school provides a maximum number of planned absences for each reason for absence.

Table 2. Summary of Clerkship Absence Policies at 15 Canadian Medical Schools [13-34]

School	<u>PERSONAL DAYS</u>				<u>PLANNED ABSENCES</u>			Maximum Number of Absences (Inclusive)
	Written Personal Day Policy?	Personal Day Definition aligns with Section B?	No Questions Asked Policy? *	Maximum Number of Personal Days	Written Planned Absence Policy?	No Questions Asked Policy? *	Maximum Number of Planned Absences	
University of British Columbia	Yes	Mostly	No	Undefined	No	-	-	Case-by-case basis, however, generally > 10 absences
University of Calgary	Yes	Mostly	No	See Maximum Number of Absences	Yes	No	Undefined	None defined. Student required to meet with faculty after accumulating 3 absences.
University of Alberta	Yes	Mostly	No	Undefined	Yes	Unclear	2 absence per 8 week rotation; 1 absence per rotation that is < 8 weeks duration	Unclear
University of Saskatchewan	No	-	-	-	Yes	No	Depends on the reason for taking an absence.	Unclear
University of Manitoba	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Maximum 2 days within a 6 week rotation or > 6 days in total	Yes	No	Undefined	No more than 25% of individual clerkship rotation
Northern Ontario School of Medicine	Yes	No definition	Unclear	Undefined	Yes	No	3rd year - undefined; 4th year - 2 per academic year	3 days per 4-week rotation (1 day in Emergency Medicine)
Western University	Yes	Unclear	No	Case-by-case basis	Yes	No	Undefined	10% of each rotation

Queen's University	Unclear as written (no emergency personal crisis section, however, there is a section on illness)	-	-	-	Yes	Yes	5 per clerkship clinical rotation schedule	Undefined
University of Ottawa	Yes	Unclear	No	See Maximum Number of Absences	Yes	No	See Maximum Number of Absences	10 per academic year
University of Toronto	Yes	Yes	Yes	3 per academic year	Yes	No	Undefined	Undefined
McMaster University	Yes	No definition	Unclear	Undefined	No	-	-	Unclear
McGill University	Yes	Mostly	No	10 full days or 20 half days	Yes	No	Depends on reason: 5 full days (10 half days) for illness and 10 full days (20 half days) for other reasons	Depends on reason: 5 full days (10 half days) for illness and 10 full days (20 half days) for other reasons
University of Sherbrooke – Moncton Campus^a	No	-	-	-	Yes	No	See Maximum Number of Absences	No more than 25% of individual clerkship rotation
Memorial University	Yes	No definition	No	3 per academic year	Yes	No	Depends on rotation	Undefined
Dalhousie University	No	-	-	-	Yes	No	See Maximum Number of Absences	3 per academic year

Personal day policies in clerkship year at Canadian medical schools affiliated with the Canadian Federation of Medical Students.

*“No Questions Asked” Policy refers to policies in which students do not need to provide a reason for their absence.

^a The Moncton campus of Université of Sherbrooke was voted to become a member of the CFMS in 2016 and is represented by both the Canadian Federation of Medical Students and the Fédération médicale étudiante du Québec.

D. Discussion, Position Statement, and Recommendations

The ultimate goal of any medical school education is to both prepare students with the knowledge necessary to diagnose and treat human illness as well as to provide students with the tools necessary for a successful professional career. An important part of being a professional is the ability to recognize when one's wellness is suffering and to respond with proper self-care. Medical schools have a responsibility to teach students these skills in a number of ways, including encouraging students to recognize when they require a personal day and to provide students the ability to act upon it. Based on the above information gleaned from the existing personal day and planned absence policies at medical schools across Canada, there is a clear lack of consensus and standardization of requirements to obtain a personal (unplanned) or planned absence. Furthermore, many policies as written, do not clearly outline important aspects of personal and planned absence policies such as the maximum number of personal and planned absences a student is granted. We believe that the Canadian medical schools mentioned in this paper are aware of the need to address student wellness and are overall supportive of this cause. However, this paper clearly highlights that there is both variability across Canada as well as uncertainty within many of the policies as written. These inconsistencies represent gaps between the needs of students and the support currently offered by our institutions which need to be reconciled.

As such, we offer the following proactive recommendations:

1. Medical schools should grant students a clearly defined number of personal days per academic year (for which we advise a minimum of 3 per academic year) or clearly indicate that personal days will be granted on a case-by-case basis. This should be exceptional to a total amount of planned absences allowed.
2. Personal days should be granted without explanation and without advance notice up to a pre-defined number, beyond which the medical school may request an explanation.
3. Planned absences should be granted with advanced notice up to a pre-defined number. Schools may independently decide upon a policy for granting planned absences without explanation.
4. Personal day policies should be easily accessible, understandable, and explained to students at the beginning of each academic year.

E. Rationale for Recommendations

1. Medical schools should grant students a clearly defined number of personal days per academic year (for which we advise a minimum of 3 per academic year) and/or indicate that more personal days will be granted on a case-by-case basis. This should be exceptional to a total amount of planned absences allowed.

Rationale: Allocating personal days to medical students promotes a measure of self-care that should be encouraged amongst all physicians. In the updated CanMEDS 2015 framework, commitment to self, including a responsibility to self and personal care, is clearly identified as a key concept within the Professional

role [35]. Personal days afford an opportunity to be active in coping with anxiety, depression, burnout, and other stressors. Providing students with a specific number of personal days gives students a sense of clarity as to what is acceptable, allows students to request these days “no questions asked.” A defined number of allowed personal days also prevents abuse of this opportunity. We advise a minimum of 3 personal days per academic year based on Memorial University’s written personal day policy. Only three schools (University of Manitoba, McGill University, and Memorial University) clearly define a maximum amount of personal days to be granted within their written policy[13, 27-32]. Of these schools, Memorial offers the lowest number of personal days at 3 per academic year. As such, this indicates that providing students with 3 personal days is a feasible and reasonable policy for other Canadian medical schools to implement. It is also understood, that allowing students the opportunity to request personal days on a case-by-case basis gives the medical school some flexibility to afford students additional days as required. Furthermore, case-by-case personal day policies assist the school in being aware and alerted to potential problems with student progress, life circumstance, mental health, amongst other considerations. Some schools may elect to have a designated minimum number of personal days per year with the caveat that additional days may be granted on a case-by-case basis to provide more flexibility.

2. Personal days should be granted without explanation and without advance notice up to a defined number, beyond which the medical school may request an explanation.

Rationale: In this paper, a **personal day** refers to **unplanned** absences that a medical student may elect to take for reasons other than: religious, physical illness, educational (e.g., scientific/research presentation or conference attendance), varsity/professional athletics, compassionate, representing the medical school, or maternity/paternity leave. Students should be granted a reasonable measure of privacy to determine when a personal day is needed. If the number of personal days acquired exceeds the maximum amount, it is reasonable for the medical school to request an explanation in order to monitor student progress, life circumstance, and mental health - amongst other considerations. Furthermore, students should be able to take personal days without providing the medical school advance notice with the understanding that many circumstances can be outside of the control of an individual student and may be unexpected. These circumstances may include but are not limited to mental health concerns, personal or family crisis, or unexpected school-related or life-related tasks. Notice should be given to the school, either retroactively or with as much advance notice as possible in order to track academic progress and as a flag for the administration to check in on students’ well-being.

3. Planned absences should be granted in an unbiased manner with advanced notice up to a pre-defined number. Schools may independently decide upon a policy for granting planned absences without explanation.

Rationale: In the paper, a **planned absence** refers to **planned** time off that a medical student may elect to take for personal reasons which might include: religious observance, physical illness, educational (e.g., scientific/research presentation or conference attendance), varsity/professional athletics, compassionate, educational commitments (e.g., representing the medical school), or childcare reasons. Students should have a right to schedule planned absences based on personal reasons, such as family events, travel, or rest. This allows flexibility within the medical curriculum and affords individuals a sense of control. It is reasonable for medical schools to request a reason for a planned absence given that these absences are premeditated by definition. However, the granting of planned absences should be based on the availability of time off in the academic cycle. Furthermore, if an explanation is requested, the explanation itself should not be used as a determining factor for whether or not the leave is granted with no prejudice based upon the provided explanation. Favour should not be granted to a particular explanation given that the relative importance of any request for a planned absence is defined by each individual student. Providing students with a specific number of planned absences gives students a sense of clarity as to what is acceptable and prevents abuse of this opportunity.

4. Personal day policies should be easily accessible, understandable and explained to students at the beginning of each academic year.

Rationale: Students should be informed of their rights and obligations. As written, many of the policies are unclear and possibly contain nuances intended to be understood by an oral presentation at orientation or by word of mouth. While students attending the medical school may understand these nuances, certain groups of students (e.g. new or visiting students) may have difficulty understanding what time off they are entitled to and who to contact. As such, the policy should be easy to locate and understand if students forget or are unclear as to their rights and obligations. Easy accessibility of these policies benefits both students and faculty as it may prevent unnecessary confusion and clarification requests by students.

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