

PODIUM 3.1 - 1:00-1:15 [10-min presentation followed by 5-min Q&A]

“COVID-19 as the equalizer”: Evolving discourses of COVID-19 and implications for medical education.

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Background: The othering of individuals through the use of language is not unique to the COVID-19 pandemic. As the early stages of the pandemic unfolded, an opportunity arose to analyze gaps in pandemic management that emerged as a result of othering and stigmatization. Our objectives were to examine: 1) the discourses that emerged during COVID-19 that highlighted population-level inequities, and 2) the implications these discourses may have for medical education.

Methods: Using a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach, an archive of public domain texts discussing COVID-19 was iteratively created, reviewed, and coded. It was analyzed for patterns of how COVID-19 highlighted structural and institutional inequity at the population level using an intersectional framework.

Results: We archived 83 texts published from March 20 to May 28, 2020. We focused our analysis on implications within Ontario. The two major discourses that emerged were “COVID-19 as equalizer” and “COVID-19 as discriminator”. The former emerged in the early stages of the pandemic to mobilize public health recommendations and describe near-universal impacts on the public. The latter followed to highlight new and pre-existing forms of marginalization exacerbated by the pandemic in an attempt to motivate an equity-informed pandemic response.

Conclusion: The construction of COVID-19 in the public domain highlights the power of discourse to influence how the pandemic is understood. Making visible how stigma has been created and exacerbated by COVID-19 has implications for how the pandemic is taught to future medical learners, and the importance of using an equity-informed lens.