# MEDICAL STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE ON ABSENTEEISM AND ITS REMEDIES

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### ABSTRACT

*Objective:* To identify reasons for absenteeism of medical students in lectures and ward rotations during the clinical years and to find out various remedies as suggested by the students.

*Study Design:* Mixed method study.

Place and Duration of Study: Shaikh Khalifa Bin Zayed Medical College Lahore, from Jan 2014 to Dec 2016.

*Material and Methods:* It was a single center sequential mixed method study conducted from 2014 to 2016. The first phase was a survey using a questionnaire to find out reasons for absenteeism. Analysis of responses helped in the identification of grey areas which were clarified and recommendations were sought to improve attendance through focused group discussion (FGD). The quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS version 20.0, and content analysis technique was combined with thematic analysis for qualitative data analysis.

*Results:* The questionnaire was distributed to 300 students. The response rate was 77%. The reasons for not attending lectures, morning and evening wards were significantly associated with year of study of students (*p*-value 0.019, 0.022 and 0.001 respectively). The main reasons identified for not attending lectures and wards in all clinical years were inappropriate educational environment, lack of inherent interest and personal reasons

*Conclusions:* The study indicated that absenteeism among medical students was mainly due to in-effective teaching, ill-defined curriculum, non-conducive learning environment, and inflexible time tables hampering quality learning. Suggested rectification measures included learner-centered teaching approaches and reverent environment to motivate future doctors for meaningful learning.

Keywords: Absenteeism, Medical students, Perspective, Remedies.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In medical colleges, students remain absent from the lectures and wards. This results in failure in the examinations and in the long-term doctor's inability to manage patients safely<sup>1</sup>. Absenteeism refers to the frequent absence from classes without any good reason<sup>2</sup>.

Undergraduate medical education aims to produce a physician with adequate knowledge of health and disease, reasonable medical skills and a healthy attitude towards patients and their families<sup>3</sup>.

Student absenteeism may contribute to low achievement or vice versa. Low achievement assumes critical importance for medical care providers who are involved in decision making in life and death situations<sup>4</sup>.

Possible reasons for absenteeism could be linked to the theory of adult learning, which explains physiological and psychological needs of an adult learner. For example, meaningful participation of an adult learner in educational activities is only possible if he or she is sufficiently motivated to learn. Motivation for learning is associated with understanding the relevance of learning something. If that learning enables a learner to solve real life problems, the interest enhances manifold. Finally, adult learners also desire safety while expressing themselves in the educational environment<sup>5</sup>. If institutions fail to address these needs, absenteeism is bound to transpire.

The interaction between faculty members and the students, in the lectures and in one-onone clinical discussions, is crucial as it is part of the professional socialization process in which

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students observe faculty members and recognize them as role models<sup>6,7</sup>. This process is important in learning professional attitudes and values among pharmacy student and is equally important for medical students, as missing opportunities for interaction due to excessive absenteeism may hinder the development of professionalism in medical graduates<sup>7,8</sup>.

In our country, medical education is still following the traditional lecture format of teaching for transfer of both knowledge, and skills. Lectures, classroom, and bedside discussion represent the primary means of teaching for undergraduate medical students. Students who miss a lot of classes and wards perform poorly on examinations because they were not present when the topics were being covered. Similarly, students with high levels of absenteeism are less committed to academics in general which may result in a poor outcome in terms of quality doctors<sup>7</sup>.

On one hand, the implications of absenteeism are clearly delineated in the literature but on the other hand, literature in medical education doesn't explicitly highlight reasons contributing towards absenteeism for lectures and specially ward rotations, and neither does it sufficiently provide contextual solutions to combat the issue of absenteeism. This study was designed to identify reasons for absenteeism of medical students, in lectures and ward rotations at Shaikh Khalifa Bin Zayed Medical College during the clinical years and suggest ways to improve it based on students' suggestions.

# MATERIAL AND METHODS

It was a single center sequential mixed method study conducted from January 2014 to December 2016 at Shaikh Khalifa Bin Zayed Medical College after approval from the institutional review board.

The first phase of the inquiry was a survey with the help of a questionnaire to find reasons for absenteeism, distributed among 300 students from 3rd, 4th, and final year MBBS, after informed consent, using non-probability convenience sampling technique. Students were ensured about confidentiality and anonymity. The questionnaire was distributed after the lecture and was collected by the principal researcher after completion. The questionnaire had both open and closed ended questions for generating both qualitative and quantitative responses. Analysis of responses from questionnaires helped in the identification of gray areas on reasons for absenteeism. Recommendations, for identified areas were found out through focused group discussion (FGD).

For FGD, 2 or 3 students from each class (3rd to final year) were selected on the basis of non-probability purposeful sampling technique. Hence those students were identified who were vocal and willing to provide suggestions to handle the issue of absenteeism. Four sessions of FGDs were conducted, each lasting from one to two hours. Sessions were moderated by year 4 residents in the department, to counter possible power dynamics and to ensure unrestrained flow of ideas from students. The FGD moderators were accordingly trained by the principal researcher. Students participating in the FGDs were given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. FGDs were audio-recorded and field notes were taken.

Data generated through questionnaires was entered into SPSS version 20.0 to calculate frequencies and percentages. Chi-square (likelihood ratio) test was used to determine the association between reasons for absenteeism from lectures and wards, and academic year i.e. third, fourth, and final year. A *p*-value less than or equal to 0.05 was regarded as significant. The qualitative data generated in the context of reasons for absenteeism from lectures and morning, and evening wards were categorized into themes representing gist of the idea using content analysis technique based on grouping words conveying similar meaning and by calculating their frequencies (table-II) to vindicate plausibility of interpretations. The content analysis identified gaps in the data for further indepth exploration through FGD.

The audio recorded data generated through FGDs was transcribed verbatim by adding information from the field notes for enrichment of evidence. Transcriptions were matched with both FGD and research questions and were then given to students for further verification, as one of the dimensions of trustworthiness. Text in the finalized transcripts was categorized under the

# RESULTS

Out of 300 students, 231 filled the administered questionnaire (77%). There were 104 males and 127 females; M:F ratio being 1:1.2 (table-I). The mean age was  $22.5 \pm 1.2$  years.

The reasons for not attending lectures were found significantly associated with the year of study of students (*p*-value=0.019). The reasons for

Year of study		Male		Female		Total			
Third 24		24 (45%)	4 (45%) 29 (55%)			53			
Fourth 26		26 (51%)	5 (51%)			51			
Final		54 (43%)		73 (57%)		127			
Total	1	.04 (45%)		127 (55%)		231			
Table-II: R	easons for Absenteeism from	m Lectures an	d Wards: Th	ird to Final `	Year MBBS.				
			Year						
Reasons		Third ye	Third year (n=53)		Fourth year (n=51)		Fifth year (n=127)		
			%	No.	%	No.	%		
	No Inherent Interest	11	20.8	13	25.5	34	26.8		
	Different Priorities	7	13.2	9	17.6	5	3.9		
Not Attending Lectures	Peer Pressure	1	1.9	0	0.0	0	0.0		
	Educational Environment	16	30.2	15	29.4	27	21.3		
	Personal Reasons	16	30.2	13	25.5	44	34.6		
	Lack Of Ethical Values	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	1.6		
	No Reason	2	3.8	1	2.0	15	11.8		
	<i>p</i> -value = 0.019								
Not attending	No Inherent Interest	4	7.5	7	13.7	13	10.2		
	Different Priorities	6	11.3	5	9.8	4	3.1		
	Peer Pressure	0	0.0	2	3.9	1	0.8		
	Lack of Ethical Values	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.8		
wards	Educational Environment	19	35.8	21	41.2	34	26.8		
(morning)	Personal Reasons	16	30.2	12	23.5	37	29.1		
	No Reason	8	15.1	4	7.8	37	29.1		
	<i>p</i> -value = 0.022								
Not Attending	No Inherent Interest	4	7.5	8	15.7	13	10.2		
	Different Priorities	4	7.5	1	2.0	2	1.6		
	Educational Environment	6	11.3	20	39.2	21	16.5		
Wards	Personal Reasons	10	18.9	5	9.8	56	44.1		
(Evening)	No Reason	29	54.7	17	33.3	35	27.6		
			<i>p</i> -value	< 0.001					

themes that emerged from the content analysis of qualitative data obtained from the survey (tables-II, III, IV & V), confirming the gist of ideas. Word frequency count was done in each category to identify words representative of the themes and comments verbatim were selected, demonstrating triangulation, rigor, and confirmability of findings. not attending the morning and evening wards were also significantly associated with the year of study of students (*p*-value 0.022 and <0.001 respectively) (table-II).

## DISCUSSION

Educational research reports a variety of reasons for missing classes among medical students<sup>9,10</sup>. This study identified the main factors

for absenteeism as no inherent interest in the subject and various personal reasons. FGDs revealed that students find lectures very boring social activities (table-III; comments 1 to 6, 10 and 11). These findings are consistent with other studies as well<sup>11,12</sup>.

Theme	Subtheme	Word Frequency (Count)	Comments Verbatim
No Inherent Interest	Boring	Boring (25) No interest (19) Unimportant (4)	1. "We do not attend lectures because they are boring and not interactive."
	Attendance	Already know (1) Attendance required fulfilled (4)	2. "Majority of the lectures are useless."
Different Priority		Another test (37) Self-study (9) Other study (2) Other commitments (2)	3. "At times, we have to prepare for a test and therefore, we stay back and don't attend lectures."
Peer Pressure		Friends not attending (4)	4. "One has to give-in because of peer pressure. At times, we do not attend lectures because of our friends."
Educational environment	Es cultos es et	Not good (59) Not interactive(45)	5. "Some of the teachers don't inspire us"
	Faculty not good	No knowledge imparted (4) Teachers not available (2) Don't understand (2)	6. "Some teachers do not connect with us on a human level so we don't feel like attending their lectures."
	Biased teacher Non- conducive environment	Prejudice (1) Environment not good (2) Lack of discipline (2) Big class size (2) Strikes (1)	7. "I cannot forget one of the teachers' comments who said that we were left overs, and couldn't get admission on merit; now faculty will make us doctors."
	Emotional and physical burn out	Sick (72) Laziness (15) Hectic (14) Absent (13) Poor health (4) Tired (4) Fever (4) Difficult (2)	8. "You are absent when you are sick."
Personal reasons	Feasibility	Getting Late (65) Emergency (26) Transport (11) Family issues (5) Hostel issues (4) Problem at home (1)	9. "If there is a death in the family, obviouslyI cannot attend."
	Other interests	Go home (8) Extracurricular (4) Got better things to do (1)	10. "When you have more interesting things to do (e.g. cricket, movie, lunch with friends) who would stay back for a boring lecture?"
Ethical values	Proxy	Proxy (7) Bunk (2)	<ul> <li>11. "We bunk classes because "proxy" is possible and the main objective is attendance, which is fulfilled"</li> <li>12. "There is no formal education regarding ethical principles neither in schools nor at home. So, we don't consider it unethical and casually miss our classes."</li> </ul>

and of low value because of lack of interaction, condescending attitude of teachers, inappropriate learning environment and more interest in other Educational environment was found as another major reason for absenteeism from lectures across all three years in this study. The factors influencing educational environment were; faculty not good, no interactive teaching",

researchers have also reported that adult learners are particularly very sensitive to learning

Table-IV: Rea	isons for not att	ending	morning wards.

Theme	Sub theme	Word Frequency (Count)	Comments Verbatim
		No interest (37)	13. "No one told us about the relevance of attending wards, so we did
		No learning (17)	not know why it was important to attend wards."
		Repetition (10)	14. "We did not pay attention as the subject addressed in the clinical
No inherent	Neither	Too much knowledge imparted (4)	rotation was not to be assessed."
Interest	helpful nor		Totation was not to be assessed.
interest	important	Wastage of time (4)	
	-	Overcrowded batch (4)	15. No explicit expectations are shared with us about learning in
		Not helpful (1)	wards."
		Not my choice (1)	
	Biased	Insult (3)	16. "They judge us and make us feel uncomfortable, hence we avoid
		Unfair (1)	going."
	Teacher	Don't let us stay longer (1)	
		Absent teacher (19)	17. "Never saw any teacher, so we don't go either"
	Faculty	Not punctual (1)	17. The ver saw any teacher, so we don't go either
	Absenteeism		
		Busy teacher (1)	
		Unclear teaching schedule (15)	18. "Junior residents are given the task of teaching us, who are
		No personal attention (11)	exceptionally busy. As a result, there is hardly any teaching."
		No interaction (8)	
E 1		No good (2)	19. "Everything (e.g. cases and clinical examination, history taking) is
Educational	Bad Teaching	Waiting (1)	available on the YouTube, so why attend wards?"
Environment		No ward test (1)	
		No practice opportunity (1)	
		1 11 5()	
		Not exam oriented (1)	
		Clinical method teaching not good (1)	
		Strike (9)	20. "There is no place to sit and wait for teachers".
	Hospital	Poor management (1)	21. "At times, the weather is very harsh. Besides, we feel unwanted
	Management		trespassers, as everyone is busy running around, doing their
	0	AC not working (6)	chores, except for us, who don't know why they are there?
	Ward	No discipline (9)	22. "Most of the times, doctors are busy in rounds and we are endlessly
	Management	Lengthy rounds (1)	waiting for them".
D:(( )			
Different	Preparing for	Preparing another test (37)	23. "When we have a test, we skip wards".
Priorities	another test	Going for lunch (2)	
Peer Pressure		Friends forcing to skip (12)	24. "Peer pressure is through word of mouth, you find out in no time
i cei i iessuie		Only female in batch (1)	that a particular ward is useless, so you don't go."
		No respect for females (1)	25. "I think, there is very little respect for females at a workplace
		Proxy's (3)	because of misogynistic tendencies in the opposite gender. They
Ethical values		Bunking for fun (3)	make sure that females feel belittled and useless in the clinical
		Durining for full (0)	environment."
		Sigle (41)	
		Sick (41)	26. "We have three back to back lectures before the wards. You get
		Emergency (26)	tired and have no energy left to attend wards."
		Tired and Fatigue (17)	
		Absent (12)	27. "In Ramadan energy levels are low. The weather is hot, so students
	Emotional	Long hours (9)	avoid coming to the wards"
	and physical	Lazy (5)	Ŭ
	burn out	Sleep (3)	
	builtout	Hectic routine (1)	
		Patient critically ill (1)	
Personal		Standing all time (1)	
		Ramadan (1)	
Reasons		Self-study (4)	28. "At times, you have to leave because no one can pick you up later."
Reasons	Personal		
Reasons	Personal Preferences		
Reasons		Extracurricular activity (4)	
Reasons		Extracurricular activity (4) Go home (5)	29. "We are clueless about our roles and responsibilities in the word
Reasons		Extracurricular activity (4) Go home (5) Transport issues (5)	29. "We are clueless about our roles and responsibilities in the ward,
Reasons		Extracurricular activity (4) Go home (5) Transport issues (5) Holiday (2)	which shatters our confidence hence leading to an avoidant
Reasons		Extracurricular activity (4) Go home (5) Transport issues (5) Holiday (2) Specific ward (3)	
Reasons		Extracurricular activity (4) Go home (5) Transport issues (5) Holiday (2) Specific ward (3) Batch not good (1)	which shatters our confidence hence leading to an avoidant
Reasons		Extracurricular activity (4) Go home (5) Transport issues (5) Holiday (2) Specific ward (3)	which shatters our confidence hence leading to an avoidant
Reasons		Extracurricular activity (4) Go home (5) Transport issues (5) Holiday (2) Specific ward (3) Batch not good (1)	which shatters our confidence hence leading to an avoidant

"poor cooling system during summers" (table-III; comments 6 and 7, table-IV; comment 21). Other

environment, as it can very easily both motivate or demotivate them. Such learners are typically known for casting vote through their feet, which infers that they walk out of the environment if it In this study, various reasons for missing morning and evening wards were non-existent

Theme	Sub Theme	Word Frequency (Count)	Comments Verbatim
Failure to Understand Relevance	Lack of guidance	Once a day is enough (17) No need (11) No interest (8) Wastage of time (5) No time for wards (3) Already know (2) No use (2) No one asked (1)	30. "Why do we need to attend wards in the evening when there is no learning".
Peer Pressure		Friends not going (8) Alone (2)	31. "At times, your friends can convince you that evening are waste of time."
Lack of Ethical values		Proxy (1)	32. "We bunk wards because "proxy" is possible."
Different Priorities		Studying other subjects (22) Test preparation (10)	33. "One has to prepare for a test and therefore, you stay back".
Educational Environment	Neither helpful nor important	Not in timetable (32) Teacher not helpful (28) No teacher available (21) No learning (4) Not yet ready (2) Patient not cooperative (1) Not interesting (1) Repetition (1) No facilitation (1) OPD in morning more helpful (1)	34. "No explicit timetable is shared, so we don't know why we have to go in the evening."
	Physical burn out	Long hours (3) Difficult schedule (1)	35. "It is very exhausting to attend morning classes and wards and then come again for the evening wards".
	Poor hospital management	Air conditioning not working (1)	36. "You don't feel like coming to a place which is too hot!"
	Ward management	Poor attendance marking (3) No bed allotment (1) Discipline (1)	37. "We are never allotted any beds. No responsibilitie and no interest!"
Personal Reasons	Feasibility	Transport issues (52) Personal commitment (19) Day scholar (3) Go home early (3) Geographical placement (1) Timing not suitable (1) Come home late (1) No permission (1) No company (1) Poor time management (1) Inconvenient (1)	38. "It is not easy to commute in the evening."
	Self-study	Studying (4)	<ol> <li>"Everything is available on the internet. It is better to engage in self-study rather than wasting your time."</li> </ol>
	Emotional and physical burn out	Tired (12) Sick (8) Lack of determination (2) Lot of burden (2) Lack of enthusiasm (1) Whole day work disturbed (1)	<ul> <li>40. "It is not easy to see disease and bereavement day in day out."</li> <li>41. "It is exhausting to attend evening wards."</li> </ul>
	Gender issues	Too late (3) Security issues (1) Personal inhibitions (1)	<ul> <li>42. "As girls, we are not allowed to stay in the hospital in the evening especially beyond 9 pm."</li> <li>43. "There are serious security issues in Lahore, as a result parents don't allow you to stay in the hospital till mid night."</li> <li>44. "Misogynistic environment creates hostility for females."</li> </ul>
	Personal Preferences	Other interests (1) Busy schedule (1)	<ul><li>45. "We have to socialize as well."</li><li>46. "Family commitments keep us busy in the evening."</li></ul>

is not conducive to learning<sup>12-14</sup>.

clinical curriculum, absent and unhelpful teachers, personal reasons such as sickness,

getting late, personal emergencies, fatigue and transport, and non-engaging educational environment (table-III; comments 4,5 and 8, table-IV; comments 20 and 21, table-V; comments 37, 38 and 41).These findings are consistent with other important reasons for absenteeism (table-III; comments 4 and 8).

The study identified a statistically significant association between three main reasons for absenteeism (no inherent interest, educational

Table-VI: Remedies suggested by students to counter absenteelsm in classes and wards.	Table-VI: Remedies suggested by students to counter absenteeism in classes and wards.
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Students'	LECTURES
Recommen-	Introduce a test week for all departments to take test.
dations to	Teaching style needs to be improved e.g. bring a patient to the lecture hall.
Improve	Improve communication skills of faculty members.
Attendance	Make lecture more interactive and interesting by adding videos, pictures, diagrams and
(Suggested	questioning.
Remedies)	There should be a break between lectures and before going to the wards.
	Possibility of multiple lectures on the same topic, so that students have the flexibility to attend
	according to their preference.
	Start evening classes.
	Improve educational environment e.g. better air-conditioning and seating arrangement.
	Introduce modular system for better understanding.
	Introduce biometric system for attendanceto reduce "proxy".
	Start lectures at 9 am instead of 8 am.
	Tea or coffee should be allowed in the class.
	Allow those students to miss lectures who are appearing in supplementary examination and
	arrange for their additional lectures afterwards.
	Arrange motivational talks for students.
	WARDS (Morning)
	Competency based list of tasks to be shared with students.
	Ward teaching should match with topics taught in the lectures for clear understanding of the
	pathology.
	Allow friends to be in the same batch.
	Teachers to have yearly sessions on medical ethics and gender studies.
	Appreciation of student performance.
	Allow multiple attempts for ward test.
	For students appearing in supplementary exam, ward timings should be flexible.
	WARDS (Evening)
	Start from 4th year and allow students to leave early as day scholars especially females have
	transport issues at night. There should be provision to stay at night for students.
	Teaching schedule with task for every day.
	Attendance should be compulsory.
	Students should be allowed to leave by 9pm.
	Teachers should ensure, there is no gender discrimination.
	Flexible evening rotation according to student convenience.

studies on this subject<sup>10-16</sup>. Peer pressure has also been identified as an important cause, because it is known to be a very strong factor in shaping young adult's behaviors and plays a strong role as a cause of absenteeism<sup>10,17</sup>. Students in this study shared peer pressure, physical and emotional burn outs, and illness as other environment, personal reasons) and third to final academic years of MBBS. However, there is no available evidence supporting this observation in the published indexed literature. The present study also found out preparing for another test, self-study and other miscellaneous commitments as "different priorities" for being absent. (tableIII; comment 3, table-IV; comment 23). This concurs well with other studies<sup>9,15</sup>.

This study highlighted two important reasons causing absenteeism specific to female students; "Misogynistic tendencies" and security issues (table-IV; comment 25, table-V; comments 42, 43 and 44). It has been reported that mistreatment of medical students is widespread (98.9%), most frequent being psychological maltreatment by residents and interns(shouting, bullying and humiliation) and sexual harassment<sup>18</sup>.

Various measures suggested by the students in this study to counter absenteeism include; interactive teaching, schedule flexibility, problem oriented learning, and task-based teaching. The need to establish a conducive environment for meaningful learning was also regarded as a key factor to improve student's motivation (comments on remedies - table-VI). Similar suggestions have been reported by other authors<sup>11,15</sup>.

### CONCLUSION

The study indicated that absenteeism among medical students was mainly due to in-effective teaching, ill-defined curriculum, non-conducive learning environment, and inflexible time tables hampering quality learning. Suggested rectification measures included learner-centered teaching approaches and reverent environment to motivate future doctors for meaningful learning.

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### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

This study has no conflict of interest to be declared by any author.

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