The Nephrology Social Media Collective Internship: Cultivating Leaders in the Age of Social Media

By Isabelle Dominique Tomacruz, Corina Teodosiu, Sophia L. Ambruso, and Michelle Lim

The rise of social media (SoMe) and free open-access medical education (#FOAMed)

The internet and social media have revolutionized the way medical information is disseminated, presented, and consumed. There is a rapid uptake of virtual and mobile-optimized modalities, where FOAMed tools are becoming a preferred modality for medical education (1–5). FOAMed differs from traditional medical education in that teaching and learning occur asynchronously within the virtual space, outside of traditional institutions and a lecture-based format. Although virtual education has grown exponentially over the last several decades, gaining the skills to harness social media as an educational platform has largely remained up to the individual, with little guidance. More recently, a few formal month-to-year-long training programs emerged, i.e., the Nephrology Social Media Collective (NSMC) internship, Academic Life in Emergency Medicine (ALiEM), CardioNerds Academy, iMED Track (Internal Medicine), and Digital Communications Fellowship (Pathology), designed to equip healthcare professionals with the tools necessary to use social media effectively in healthcare in their respective fields (6–10).

Enter the NSMC

The NSMC internship was established in 2015 as a year-long, free, online, mentored training program envisioned to “train healthcare professionals to effectively harness social media in their respective fields (6–10)." The internship runs from January to November of each year, where the interns are divided into 4 mentoring pods and rotate through the four NSMC core rotations:

1. Graphical communications: to create visual abstracts and infographics with the potential of publication in journals
2. Tweetorial and blogposts: to produce and publish tweetorials and blog posts with the Renal Fellow Network and American Journal of Kidney Disease (AJKD) blog
3. Podcasting: to contribute to the NSMC podcast, “Tales from the Tubule,” under the guidance of experienced podcast producers
4. NephJC (a Twitter-based journal club): to produce visual abstracts and summaries and to participate and host the fortnightly NephJC

Most of the public activities occur on Twitter, whereas the back-channel communication between interns and faculty occurs on a semi-private communication platform (Slack) (13). Interns also learn important social media skills—including Online Professionalism, Medical Advocacies, Social Media and Leadership, Twitter & Slack 101, Creating and Producing Podcasts, and Animated Videos—from the faculty and invited speakers during “Open Mic Nights,” which take place on Zoom. These sessions are recorded so they can be watched at any time.

In addition to this, interns are encouraged to create FOAMed resources for the highly popular annual online educational game NephMadness and attend a unique educational meeting, KIDNEYcon, held every April, for those interested in participating in hands-on workshops and collaborating and learning more about nephrology. There are also multiple opportunities to work on projects with collaborators who are leaders and pioneers in nephrology education.

Onward and upward

The internship culminates with a graduation ceremony during the American Society of Nephrology’s Kidney Week every fall, where faculty, alumni, and invited speakers celebrate the achievements of the past year. Although this signifies the end of the internship, the connections and opportunities created by the internship have provided avenues to collaborate with colleagues from all over the world, serve as leaders on national committees, join editorial boards of journals, give talks in local and international conferences, as well as provide mentorship to younger interns. All of these opportunities serve as a springboard to propel careers and cultivate new generations of leaders and pioneers in nephrology education around the globe.

For more information about the program, visit the website www.nsmc.blog, and look for applications each December.

Isabelle Dominique Tomacruz, MD, is a Clinical Fellow at Philadelphia General Hospital, Manilla, Philippines. Corina Teodosiu, MD, is a Nephrology Intern at Carol Davila Clinical Hospital, Bucharest, Romania. Sophia L. Ambruso, DO, is an Assistant Professor at the University of Colorado School of Medicine & Rocky Mountain Regional VA Medical Center, Aurora, CO. Michelle Lim, MBChB, MRCP, is a Clinical Fellow at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh, Scotland.

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Mentorship and early educational experiences play critical roles in influencing trainees’ long-term career goals, and the field of nephrology is no exception. Like any specialty, one’s decision to pursue nephrology likely results from a combination of clinical experiences, nephrology education, and mentorship both during medical school and residency. A majority of nephrology fellows previously reported deciding to pursue a nephrology fellowship during residency (1), and 33% of US internal medicine subspecialty fellows who did not choose nephrology identified the lack of a clear mentor as being one of the reasons for not doing so (2). Additionally, almost one-quarter of respondents highlighted how a lack of positive nephrology educational experiences negatively impacted their decision to pursue nephrology as a career (2). Whereas these data reinforce the anecdotal importance of mentorship in specialty selection, opportunities for the creation and establishment of mentor-mentee relationships are not always readily available—particularly within nephrology. Creation of peer-peer networks and trainee-mentor relationships in nephrology may also be difficult given the relatively small number of applicants to nephrology fellowship programs. After the 2020 Nephrology Fellowship Match, 43% of training programs remained unfilled for the 2021 academic year (3). Further, nephrology educational experiences are often limited to preclinical coursework in medical school and both didactics and clinical experiences during internal medicine or pediatric residencies.

To address these needs within nephrology, a 1-year international, virtual mentoring program for trainees (NephSIM Nephrons) was launched in January 2021 (4). The goal of this program is to provide an array of virtual learning and networking experiences throughout the year for trainees of all levels who have an interest in learning more about nephrology as a specialty. Trainees in the program are divided into groups (tubules) of 7–8 and paired with 2–3 volunteer faculty mentors (Figure 1). Trainees and mentors have been paired to try to match similar interests as well as geographical locations. The NephSIM Nephrons faculty consists of 45 nephrologists with diverse geographical and career backgrounds. The 2021 cohort of 112 trainees are located in 24 countries, with 33% of the participants being medical students and 60% being internal medicine or pediatrics residents. Other Nephrons participants include graduate students, as well as several postdoctoral trainees and research assistants.

The 1-year virtual curriculum for trainees (Figure 2) is designed to expose trainees to diverse nephrology educational experiences earlier in their medical careers and provide opportunities to identify and form relationships with nephrologists. Several of these educational sessions highlight nephrology free, open-access medical education (FOAMed) resources such as NephSIM (5), NephMadness (6), and Arkana Live Nephropathology (7) sessions. During quarterly tubule meetings, trainees have the opportunity not only to get to know their faculty mentors but also to discuss nephrology-specific topics. NephSIM Nephrons provides an opportunity to learn about nephrology as a specialty and to connect with others in the same field, which can be particularly valuable for those who are considering a career in nephrology.

**Figure 1. NephSIM Nephrons program structure**

**Figure 2. NephSIM Nephrons 1-year virtual curriculum**

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