

Building bridges between provinces: The Conference of Atlantic Medical Students

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The seventh annual Conference of Atlantic Medical Students (CoAMS) was held from April 26-28, 2024, at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. This student-led initiative brought together over 100 medical students from the four medical school campuses in Atlantic Canada. The goals of the conference were to convene like-minded medical students, encourage networking, stimulate intellectual discourse, and provide learning opportunities through a variety of practical workshops. In this article, we reflect on the importance of this successful weekend to ensure continued enthusiasm for CoAMS amongst medical students in Atlantic Canada.

The Conference of Atlantic Medical Students (CoAMS) was founded in an effort to bridge the geographical divides within the Atlantic provinces by providing a platform for medical students in the region to network, share research, and learn from one another. The conference is hosted annually by a different campus on an alternating basis and has been growing rapidly since its return to full in-person programming following the pandemic. The participating medical schools are Dalhousie University (Halifax, NS and Saint John, NB), Centre de formation médicale du Nouveau-Brunswick (Moncton, NB), and Memorial University (Saint John's, NL). Following a successful CoAMS in Saint John's in 2023, Halifax had a clear mandate to build on this momentum. After months of hard work by a dedicated committee of medical students, we achieved this goal in April when CoAMS 2024 was hosted at Dalhousie University.

Planning for CoAMS 2024 began in late 2023, against the backdrop of a particularly harsh summer and fall marked by widespread wildfires, floods, and hurricanes that caused significant devastation throughout Nova Scotia and the other Atlantic provinces. In May 2023, 200 homes were destroyed when fires tore through several communities outside Halifax, stretching the resources of Nova Scotia's fire departments and displacing 16,400 residents.¹ Mere weeks later, a provincial state of emergency was declared after historic floods destroyed roads, bridges, and homes.² The impact of Hurricane Lee in late 2023 further fractured a province that was still recovering from Hurricane Fiona, which had occurred a year earlier.

This difficult year highlighted the challenges that await future physicians in Canada, revealing the stark reality that our prac-

tice will occur in an increasingly different world compared to previous generations. Bringing together medical students, who will be future physician colleagues, to have open discussions about current challenges and potential solutions is perhaps more important now than ever. CoAMS 2024 provided a platform to achieve this.

It was in the context of these pressing challenges that the theme of CoAMS 2024, *Innovation and Inspiration: Resilience in a World of Change*, was aptly chosen. To facilitate comprehensive discussion of this multifaceted and complex theme, two areas of focus were prioritized: 1) Climate Change and Disaster Response, and 2) Mental Resilience. These focal areas were addressed through a series of keynote speakers and hands-on workshops. In addition to these sessions, the conference provided a platform for student-led research presentations, showcasing the academic dedication and achievements of Atlantic medical students. In all, CoAMS 2024 hosted 125 delegates, who participated in 40 research poster presentations, 24 oral research presentations, ten hands-on workshops, and five keynote speaker sessions across three days. The following discussion will summarize those events and provide commentary on 1) the importance of this weekend, and 2) why future participation in CoAMS should be encouraged.

The Conference

Following the welcome ceremony and networking exposition in the Sir Charles Tupper Medical Building on Friday night, CoAMS 2024 commenced on Saturday morning with a student-led academic research session. Delegates were fortunate to welcome Drs. Jon Bailey, Beata Derfalvi, Ron El-Hawary, Sarah Fraser, Liane Johnson, Matthew Oldfield, and Ellen

Sweeney, as judges. Students from all participating universities were invited to submit abstracts and present their research to judges and fellow delegates, either through a poster presentation or a five-minute oral presentation. The breadth and quality of research presented was remarkable, with ten research prizes awarded for the best presentation in the categories of Medicine, Surgery, Community/Global Health, Humanities, and Basic Science. A list of winners, along with their research project, can be found in Table 1.

Discussions around disaster response began Saturday afternoon with a keynote address by Dr. Andrew Travers. Dr. Travers captivated the conference audience during an hour-long session, where he outlined general strategies for managing emergency scenes and disaster response. In what was already a fascinating talk, Dr. Travers concluded with a personal account of his experience as a first responder during the 2001 9/11 disaster in New York City, having been in the city for a conference at the time.

Following this keynote session, delegates solidified their new-found knowledge through hands-on learning opportunities. Four workshops (Primary Surveying, Airway Management, Trauma Teams, and Tourniquets/Wound Care) were led by emergency medicine, family medicine, and orthopaedic surgery residents. These sessions allowed students to learn

practical skills they would soon apply in real-time during a full-scale mass casualty simulation held in the Collaborative Health Education Building. During the simulation, participants assumed various roles within trauma teams, where they were responsible for triaging and medically stabilizing several patients. After stabilizing the patients, the delegates handed their patients over to paramedics, providing instructions on triage level for hospital transport. For many students, this session was their first ever exposure to concepts such as triaging emergency scenes and working in a trauma team, making the simulation a standout experience of the weekend.

The excitement of Saturday's activities concluded with the CoAMS social event, held that evening at Bulwark Cider House. The gathering provided delegates with an invaluable opportunity to further cement the professional networks and personal friendships that had developed over the weekend.

Sunday morning's program featured two keynote speakers who addressed Climate Change and Planetary Health. Dr. Geldenhuys and Dr. McEachern delivered compelling talks on the social and commercial determinants of health. They highlighted the significant impact of healthcare on our environment, often due to waste and inefficiencies, and practical ways to get involved with promising initiatives in Nova Scotia and other Atlantic provinces. Such programs, working hard



Figure 1 | Delegates are addressed during the CoAMS 2024 opening ceremony.

to ensure sustainable practices within healthcare and our society, include the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment and the Ecology Action Centre.

At the conclusion of these sessions, delegates participated in a combination of procedural skills and wellness sessions, facilitated by a number of healthcare professionals and community members. Procedural skill sessions included knee aspirations, punch biopsies, pap smears/IUD training, and lumbar puncture; all sessions were facilitated by a resident physician and featured hands-on practice with training models. The wellness sessions included art therapy, a discussion with the Student Affairs office around combating burnout, and a CaRMS Tips & Tricks discussion with family medicine and pediatric residents.

The conference closed on Sunday afternoon with a final keynote discussion by Martha Reid and Dr. Timothy Christie, focusing on mental health and resilience. Martha Reid explored the psychosocial hazards prevalent in healthcare settings, emphasizing their potential to profoundly impact patient care if not adequately managed. Dr. Christie underscored the critical role of advocacy within the medical profession. This engaging discourse provided a fitting conclusion to CoAMS 2024.

Discussion

In this article, we aim to highlight the success of CoAMS 2024 and encourage buy-in for the organization and planning of future events. Below, we outline how a 100% student-led initiative was able to utilize Dalhousie University resources, community partners, and student enthusiasm to deliver a high-quality conference experience to over 100 medical students. The connections forged at CoAMS 2024 are sure to develop into lasting relationships between colleagues, highlighting the importance of similar events continuing in the future.

The CoAMS 2024 committee received an incredible amount of positive feedback, both during and after the conference weekend. Delegates greatly appreciated the opportunity to meet and network with peers from other medical schools, as well as the fantastic facilities and resources provided by Dalhousie University, which contributed significantly to the conference's success. A considerable portion of equipment used during the conference was generously provided by various schools, community clinics, and individual interest groups. Without this extensive network of resources, the hands-on learning experiences offered to participants would have been greatly reduced.

Table 1 | Prize winners from CoAMS 2024 Research Day.

Prize Winner	Category	Research Title
Poster Presentations		
Madeleine Crawford (DMNS)	Medicine	Using artificial intelligence as a melanoma screening tool in self-referred patients
Kate Chua (DMNS)	Surgery	Predictions and outcomes of complications after pancreaticoduodenectomy in the geriatric population versus non-geriatric population: Assessment of the ACS NSQIP risk assessment tool
Jennifer Akerman (DMNB)	Global Health	Barriers and promising practices in accessing stable housing for birthing people who use substances (BPWUS) in New Brunswick: A mixed-methods study
Jill Lamb (DMNS)	Humanities	Thematic analysis: can being exposed to going to the doctor through play alleviate children's anxiety?
Nicholas Zink (DMNS)	Basic Science	Mlit1/Af1q/Tcf7c is required for trigeminal innervation of the masseter
Oral Presentations		
Olivia Piccolo (DMNS)	Medicine	Impact of income quintile and distance to cancer center on survival in pediatric extracranial solid tumours: A report from the Cancer in Young People in Canada (CYP-C)
Christi Joyce (DMNS)	Surgery	Effects of surgical modality on post-operative post-void residual in men undergoing surgery for benign prostatic enlargement
Omar Altourah (DMNS)	Global Health	Analysis of influencer videos and their credentials in TikTok for information citation on nutrition advice and sponsorship
Gizelle Francis (DMNS)	Humanities	Exploring supports in place for mothers in medical school – a qualitative interview study
Zack Clancy (MUN)	Basic Science	The effects of total parenteral nutrition and methyl supplementation on glucose homeostasis

Registration numbers and delegate participation for CoAMS 2024 surpassed initial projections. Despite early logistical concerns related to travel and navigating complex scheduling of multiple medical schools, over half of delegates were students from Memorial University or Centre de formation médicale du Nouveau-Brunswick. This high attendance may have been facilitated by the substantial travel bursaries awarded by CoAMS, thanks to the generous support of sponsors. These bursaries were awarded to all delegates who applied, using an equity-based approach that considered factors such as the method of travel, accommodation requirements, and financial support from their respective schools. This approach resulted in a diverse and enthusiastic delegation of medical students, whose active participation significantly contributed to the weekend being a great success.

It is also worth reflecting on the substantial effort by the CoAMS 2024 team to host and deliver this conference. In the six months leading up to April 26th, the entirely student-led committee meticulously planned every aspect of the weekend, all while balancing the demands of being full-time medical students. This endeavor exemplified a resilient team effort in the face of various personal and academic stressors throughout the year. The committee's ability to tailor the conference to the interests of medical students was integral in providing an optimal experience for all delegates.



Figure 2 | Delegates practice lumbar punctures during Sunday's procedural skills session.

The weekend, however, was not without its challenges. Ensuring an equity-based approach to funding distribution, with consideration to different financial situations and geographic travel, proved difficult. Ultimately an algorithm was decided on by committee members; however, future committees should refine this process to ensure no student is unable to attend due to financial barriers. Additionally, a slew of technology problems threatened the success of the mass casualty simulation, and attendance at some sessions was notably less than others. This may have simply been the toll of a busy weekend schedule, or because some sessions were deemed less relevant by delegates. Future conference planning could benefit from a more pragmatic approach to scheduling relevant talks, using information obtained in advance from delegates on what sessions would be of most benefit to them.

Nevertheless, CoAMS 2024 served as a strong reminder that the field of medicine is full of brilliant, inspirational, and compassionate individuals who are eager to make a meaningful impact on the world. The success of the conference was significantly bolstered by the generosity of clinics, staff, and residents, as well as the delegates' willingness to engage, network, and learn new skills. Despite the demanding nature of medical education and the broader challenges facing healthcare today, 125 delegates, along with over 30 volunteers, residents, and planners, came together at CoAMS 2024 to create a vibrant, educational environment for connection and knowledge sharing. The significance of events such as this, and the opportunities they provide, cannot be overstated. As medical students in the Atlantic provinces navigate a landscape of evolving challenges, the connections fostered at events like CoAMS will continue to ensure medical students are well-equipped to enter the healthcare workforce.

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1. CBC News. "Multiple calls keep crews busy as Halifax-area wildfire continues to burn." 1 June 2023. <<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/halifax-area-wild-fire-june1-1.6861585>> (20 May 2024).
2. CBC News. "A tough couple months: Flood forces 750 Halifax residents from their homes." 22 July 2023. <<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/flood-evacuees-halifax-area-jul-22-1.6915165>> (20 May 2024).