

Editorial

Aetiopathogenesis of delayed medical postgraduate admissions

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INTRODUCTION

After the Independence, for decades, new admissions to the postgraduate (PG) medical courses had been a routine periodic/annual affair. The completion of the internship followed by two six monthly house jobs in complimentary specialties, submitting the choice among those two specialties, interview with the college authorities, and preparation of the overall merit of the candidate at the local medical college level and allotment of the PG seats within the individual colleges was the norm. The exception to this was the central institutes, like Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education and Research, Chandigarh (*Alma Mater* of yours truly), where after appearing for the national level entrance examination, one secured the seat according to merit.

With the passage of time, the process went through plenty of modifications such as permutations and combinations in the eligibility criteria, the introduction of National Eligibility Cum Entrance, Test for PG' (NEET-PG), pooling of seats, different pools of "All India Level" or "state level," multiple rounds of counseling, so on, and so forth.

STANDARD CHRONOLOGY OF PG MEDICAL ADMISSIONS

Essentially, the chronology of PG medical course admissions in India typically followed a structured process governed by the National Medical Commission and conducted through the NEET-PG. The following used to be the usual timeline of the PG medical admission process in India.

January – February: NEET-PG notification and registration

- National Board of Examinations (NBE) releases notification for NEET-PG
- Online registration opens for candidates.

March – April: NEET-PG examination

- The computer-based NEET-PG examination is conducted nationwide.

May – June: Results and rank list declaration

- NEET-PG results are announced within a month of the examination.
- The merit list is prepared based on cutoffs and reservation criteria.

(Medical Counselling Committee, and State Counselling)

- Round 1: Candidates choose seats in All India Quota and State Quotas
- Round 2: The remaining seats are filled
- Mop-Up round: For vacant seats
- Stray vacancy round: Final filling of unoccupied seats.

August – September: Start of academic session

- Training of PG medical students begins.

RECENT DELAYS IN PG MEDICAL ADMISSIONS

However, since few years, delayed admissions to PG medical courses in India have become a recurring issue, affecting students, healthcare institutions, and overall medical education. For example:

Effectively, the entire process of completion of admissions of 2024 batch has happened by February 28, 2025, as the last permitted date for joining the college (after completion of first, second, mop-up, and a stray round). The session that should have started by August had to start from December 20th, 2024 (with the entry of first counseling students). Must mention about the latecomers and stragglers joining by 7th of March, effectively losing additional more than 2 and ½ months of the session.

CAUSES OF DELAYED ADMISSIONS

There are various causes for delayed admissions such as Table 1.

Pandemic and policy shifts

- COVID-19 disrupted the academic calendar, creating a backlog in admissions
- Changes in seat distribution policies and quotas require time for implementation.

Changes in admission processes

- Frequent modifications in the NEET-PG examination pattern, counseling procedures, and reservation policies lead to confusion and delays
- Introduction of new reforms, such as merging state and central counseling, extends the timeline
- NEET-PG 2024: The counseling process for NEET-PG 2024 was postponed because the NBEMS in Medical Sciences (NBEMS) needed to issue state-specific ranks. Both state and central counseling had to be conducted simultaneously, leading to the delay. In addition, ongoing legal proceedings against NBEMS contributed to the uncertainty in setting the counseling timelines.^[1]

Legal challenges and court cases

- Students often file petitions challenging the results, cutoff marks, seat allotment, or reservation criteria

Table 1: The chronology of the events during admission process of medical PG students.

Year	Examination date	Result date	Counseling start	Admission delay reasons
2020	January 5	Jan 30	June	COVID-19 pandemic delayed the process.
2021	September 11	Sep 28	January 2022	Pandemic disruption and Supreme Court case on EWS quota.
2022	May 21	June 1	September 15	Delay due to pending 2021 batch backlog.
2023	March 5	Mar 14	August 2023	Legal cases over cutoffs and counseling policies.
2024	July 14 (Postponed from March)	Aug 14	September/October	Legal challenges and vacant seat issues.

EWS: Economically weaker sections, PG: Postgraduate

- Supreme Court and High Court interventions lead to postponements while awaiting verdicts
- Petitions filed by students in the Supreme Court concerning NEET results have further delayed the admission process. For instance, in October 2024, the admission process for PG medical courses was put on hold due to such petitions, affecting approximately 2700 NEET-PG seats in certain states.^[2]

Technical and administrative issues

- Errors in examination results or technical glitches in the registration and counseling portals cause unexpected delays.
- State-wise counseling coordination takes time, further pushing back admissions.

Vacant seats and low participation

- Increasing seat vacancies due to high tuition fees in private colleges and low stipends in certain specialties discourage students, slowing the admission process
- Many students choose to reattempt NEET-PG for better courses rather than taking available seats
- A significant number of PG medical seats remained unfilled. Approximately 15,000–16,000 seats were vacant after the second round of NEET-PG 2024 counseling, with around 1500 of these in Maharashtra. This trend has been increasing, with 4400 seats unfilled in the

2022–23 academic year, marking a 17.5% rise from the previous year.^[3]

COSTS OF DELAYED ADMISSIONS:

Delayed admissions to PG medical courses in India come with significant financial, academic, and healthcare costs. Here's a breakdown:

Financial costs

For students

- Lost earning potential – A delay of 6 months–1 year means PG students lose salary/stipend, which can be ₹6–12 lakh per year in government medical colleges
- Increased loan burden – Students who take educational loans face prolonged repayment periods, leading to extra interest costs
- Higher living expenses – Students waiting for admissions have to bear living costs (rent, food, and examination prep) for additional months without income
- Additional coaching fees – Many students take extra coaching while waiting, adding to expenses.

For colleges and hospitals

- Operational costs – Medical colleges delay collecting tuition fees, affecting their cash flow
- Underutilized infrastructure – Teaching hospitals lose efficiency as seats remain vacant, impacting revenue from patient services
- Delayed Research and Grants – PG students contribute to hospital research; delays affect grants and projects.

Academic costs

Academic session disruption and compressed academic schedule

- The academic calendar gets compressed, leading to shortened teaching periods and increased workload for students
- Shorter terms mean less time for practical training, affecting skill development. Overlapping academic sessions affect learning quality.

Delayed graduation and specialization

- Final-year PG students graduate later than expected, delaying their entry into the workforce. Students finish their courses late, postponing their career progression, like appearing for NEET- Superspecialty or a Senior Residents.
- Specialists enter the healthcare system late, affecting the supply of qualified doctors in critical fields. This further exacerbates the shortage of skilled professionals in rural and underserved areas.

Shortage of resident doctors

- Teaching hospitals and government medical institutions face shortages of junior doctors, affecting patient care
- Existing doctors have to work longer hours, leading to burnout.

Increased mental stress for students

- Uncertainty about admission timelines adds to anxiety and affects students' mental health. Delays force students into prolonged periods of inactivity, affecting motivation and focus

Reduced competitiveness

- Late admissions cause a mismatch with global medical education timelines, affecting students planning to study/work abroad.

Healthcare costs

Shortage of junior doctors

- Hospitals face a lack of PG residents, increasing workload on existing doctors.

Longer patient wait times

- Fewer specialists in training mean delays in surgeries, consultations, and critical care services.

Increased doctor burnout

- Senior doctors and existing residents work extra shifts, leading to fatigue and medical errors.

Financial strain on students and institutions

- Students who take loans for medical education face extended repayment periods
- Medical colleges suffer financial instability due to postponed fee collection and operational delay.

These delays in PG admissions have led to increased anxiety among students and challenges for educational institutions in managing academic as well as work schedules, especially in clinical branches. The PG medical admission cycle is meant to be completed within 6–7 months but has faced significant delays due to contributing factors like such as policy and procedural changes, legal challenges, the implementation of new admission frameworks, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Delayed PG medical admissions disrupt the academic cycle, increase financial stress, and weaken the healthcare system. Efficient counseling, legal clarity, and better administrative

planning can help minimize these costs. There is a need for better planning and a streamlined admission process with better coordination, early counseling, and minimal legal hurdles to avoid disruptions and ensure a stable academic and healthcare system.

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