Navigating the storm: Analysing the impact of recent controversies in NEET entrance exams on students and medical institution

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ABSTRACT:

Introduction: The National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) serves as a gateway for medical education in India. However, controversies related to eligibility criteria, examination patterns, and administrative inefficiencies have created undue stress for aspirants and negatively impacted medical institutions. This study examines these challenges and their implications for students and faculty. **Materials and Methods:** A mixed-method approach was adopted, using stratified random sampling to survey 500 NEET PG aspirants and 50 faculty members. Quantitative data were collected through online questionnaires, while qualitative data were gathered via interviews. The analysis focused on stress, academic performance, and perceptions of the NEET process. **Results:** Quantitative results showed that 64% of aspirants reported increased stress, and 51% experienced anxiety due to controversies. Nearly 47% noted a decline in academic performance, with mock test scores dropping by an average of 15%. A small proportion (2%) considered quitting or pursuing alternate career paths. Faculty responses indicated significant curriculum misalignment (48%) and increased workloads, with 72% observing a decline in student confidence. **Discussion:** The findings highlight the psychological toll of systemic inefficiencies, including inconsistent cutoff scores and lack of transparency in the counseling process. Comparisons with existing literature underscore the role of societal pressures and prolonged preparation periods in exacerbating stress levels. Faculty stress due to curriculum changes further underscores the need for reforms. Recommendations include enhanced mental health support, simplified admission processes, and better communication between stakeholders to rebuild trust in the system.

Keywords: NEET controversies, medical education, student stress, faculty workload, policy reforms, mental health

INTRODUCTION:

It is noticed that in recent years, the NEET examination has faced several controversies that should raise alarm among students, educators, and policymakers. Several allegations of malpractice and the increasing pressure on students have contributed to an unpleasant atmosphere for medical aspirants. This manuscript shows how these controversies have impacted aspirants mental health, academic performance, and the reputation of medical institutions[1,2].

There are three NEET examinations conducted by NTA, NBEMS, and NBE, respectively:

NEET UG (National Eligibility cum Entrance Test for Undergraduate):

NEET UG is an entrance exam for undergraduate medical courses in India, including MBBS and BDS. It is conducted by the National Testing Agency (NTA) and is essential for students who wish to pursue a career in medicine or dentistry. This exam is held once a year[3].

NEET PG (National Eligibility cum Entrance Test for Postgraduate):

NEET PG is an entrance exam for postgraduate medical courses. This exam is conducted by the NBEMS for those aiming to specialize in a particular branch of medicine. MD and MS are three-year

residency programs, while diploma programs are for two years[4, 5].

NEET SS (National Eligibility cum Entrance Test for Super Specialty):

NEET SS is an entrance exam for super-specialty courses, such as DM and MCh. The NBE board conducts the SS examination, and it is a three-year residency program[4].

Problems Faced by Medical Students and Faculty:

1. **Lack of Clarity in Eligibility**: Changes in eligibility criteria and age limits, along with poor clarification, leave candidates confused[1,2].
2. **Changes in Examination Pattern**: Last-minute syllabus changes disrupt aspirants' preparation[6].
3. **Sudden Change in Exam Dates**: Changes a day before the exam, after issuing admit cards, create confusion and increased stress[3].
4. **Delays in Result Announcements**: Delays lead to postponed counseling, late admissions, and missing subsequent exams[5].
5. **Reservation Issues**: Policy changes lead to feelings of bias and unfairness among candidates[3,5].
6. **Scheduling Conflicts**: Clashing exam dates disrupt the admissions process for aspirants[3,5].
7. **Inconsistent Merit Lists**: Discrepancies in weightage alter merit rankings and raise fairness concerns[6].
8. **Cutoff Variability**: Severe year-to-year fluctuations in cutoff marks create uncertainty for aspirants[3].
9. **Counselling Process Complexity**: Increasing complexity in counseling procedures results in missed opportunities due to a lack of clear information[1,3].
10. **Limited Seats in Top Institutions**: High competition for limited seats leads to significant pressure on aspirants[5].
11. **Inter-state Discrepancies**: Variations in state-level admission policies cause confusion[6].
12. **Judicial Delays**: Legal challenges further delay the admission process[5].
13. **Information Gaps**: Lack of accurate information about processes causes anxiety and errors[5].

This study evaluates the impact of NEET-related controversies on aspirants and faculty, focusing on stress, mental health, academic performance, and systemic fairness. Its unique approach integrates perspectives from both stakeholders, combining quantitative and qualitative methods to provide actionable insights for improving the NEET process.

This study aims to assess the impact of NEET- PG related controversies on aspirants and faculty members, focusing on stress, mental health, academic outcomes, and system fairness. By capturing detailed insights, it seeks to provide actionable recommendations for improving the NEET PG process and supporting stakeholders effectively.

MATERIALS AND METHODS:

Stratified random sampling is implemented for integrating quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to perceive a better understanding of the complexities surrounding the NEET controversies. Random sampling is done to ensure that the entire sample reflects a diverse population, with different background facilitating a more better analysis of the issues involved.

Sample Population Participants:

1. Total number of NEET PG aspirants - 500 :
   Repeaters – 386 participants
   Freshers – 114 participants
   Males – 263 participants
   Females – 237 participants

2. Total number of Faculty - 50
   Preclinical Subject Faculty - 15
   Paraclinical Subject Faculty - 17
   Clinical Subject Faculty – 18
   Males – 31
   Female – 19

Data Collection Analysis:
   1. **Quantitative Surveys**:
Questionnaire were prepared in google forms and distributed online via sharing the links of the forms, it allows the participants to complete the survey at their convenience. Nine different types of question were prepared for the aspirants.

   2. **Qualitative Interviews:**
Interviews were conducted either in person or via video conferencing apps, based on participants preferences. Questions were asked verbally so as to understand the deep insights of faculty point and, also allowing for flexibility in participants response.

Questionnaires for NEET PG Aspirants:
Section 1: Demographic Information:
(Open Ended)
1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
3. Since when are you preparing for Neet PG.?
4. Have you joined coaching institute or you have relied on self study.?
5. How many hours do you spend in coaching (If joined an coaching institute)
6. How many hours do you study for NEET PG preparation.?

Section 2: Challenges Faced Due to NEET:

[Not at all (0), Slightly (1), Moderately (2), Quite a lot (3), Completely (4)]

1. How would you describe your stress level during NEET PG preparation.?
2. Have you experienced any last-minute changes in the exam pattern or schedule. How much it impacted you.?
3. How has the NEET PG process impacted your mental health?
4. Did you find the reservation policies or cutoff variability confusing or unfair?
5. Were you aware of the counselling procedures in advance?
6. How would you rate the communication from NEET PG authorities regarding changes or updates?
7. Did you feel supported by your family and peers during NEET PG preparation?
8. How confident were you in your ability to clear NEET PG?
9. Do you believe NEET PG exams test the necessary skills for medical education?
10. Did you consider quitting NEET PG preparation at any point?

Section 3: Outcomes:

[Not at all (0), Slightly (1), Moderately (2), Quite a lot (3), Completely (4)]

1. Has the NEET process caused you to reconsider your career path?
2. How has NEET preparation affected your academic performance?
3. Do you feel the NEET process is fair and transparent?
4. Did NEET preparation affect your physical health (e.g., sleep, appetite, energy levels)?
5. Do you feel that the NEET preparation material and coaching provided were sufficient?
6. How has NEET preparation affected your academic performance?
7. Do you feel the NEET process is fair and transparent?

8. Did the availability of study resources influence your preparation positively?
9. Were financial constraints a significant barrier during your NEET preparation?
10. How supportive was your institution or coaching center during your NEET preparation?
11. How do you evaluate the role of peer discussions or study groups in your preparation?
12. Did you experience technical difficulties during online NEET preparation or mock tests?

Section 4: Open-ended Questions:

1. What do you find most challenging about the NEET process? (Open-ended)
2. How has the NEET process impacted your daily life and routines? (Open-ended)
3. What changes would you suggest to improve the NEET examination system? (Open-ended)
4. Do you believe that the struggle is worth it .?

Faculty Questionnaires (Open-Ended):

1. Have you noticed an increase in students' stress and anxiety levels due to NEET controversies?
2. How would you rate the impact of NEET controversies on students' academic performance?
3. Have you observed students reconsidering their career paths due to the challenges in the NEET process?
4. Do you believe the NEET counselling and admission processes are transparent and fair?
5. How supportive do you feel the institutions are in addressing students' mental health issues?
6. Do you think changes in NEET policies and procedures are clearly communicated to faculty and students?
7. How would you evaluate the impact of NEET controversies on faculty workload and stress?
8. Have you encountered difficulties in aligning the academic curriculum with the evolving NEET requirements?
9. Do you feel there is a need for reforms in the NEET examination system?
10. What specific changes would you suggest to improve the NEET process?

RESULTS:

Table 1 : Neet aspirants answers were recorded in the following parameter

Parameter	Aspirants Response (500)
Increased Stress	320
Anxiety	256
Health Concerns	151
Performance Decline	236
Faith In system	78

Financial Impact	**157**
Career planning Disruption	**178**
Effect on Extracurricular Activities	**145**
Social Impact	**204**
Choosing Alternate Paths/ Quitting Medicine	**10**

Table 2 : Medical college faculties answers were recorded in the following parameter

Parameter	Faculty Response (50)
Curriculum Mismatch	**24**
Faculty Burnout	**04**
Late Joining Tampering Better Output	**23**
Student Engagement Issues	**36**
Changes in Assessment	**41**

Fig 1 : Medical Aspirant Response To Neet Controversies

Fig 2 : Faculties Response To Neet Controversies

Bar chart showing faculties response values: Curriculum Mismatch ≈ 24, Faculty Burnout ≈ 8, Late Joining Tampering Better Output ≈ 23, Student Engagement Issues ≈ 36, Changes in Assessment ≈ 41.
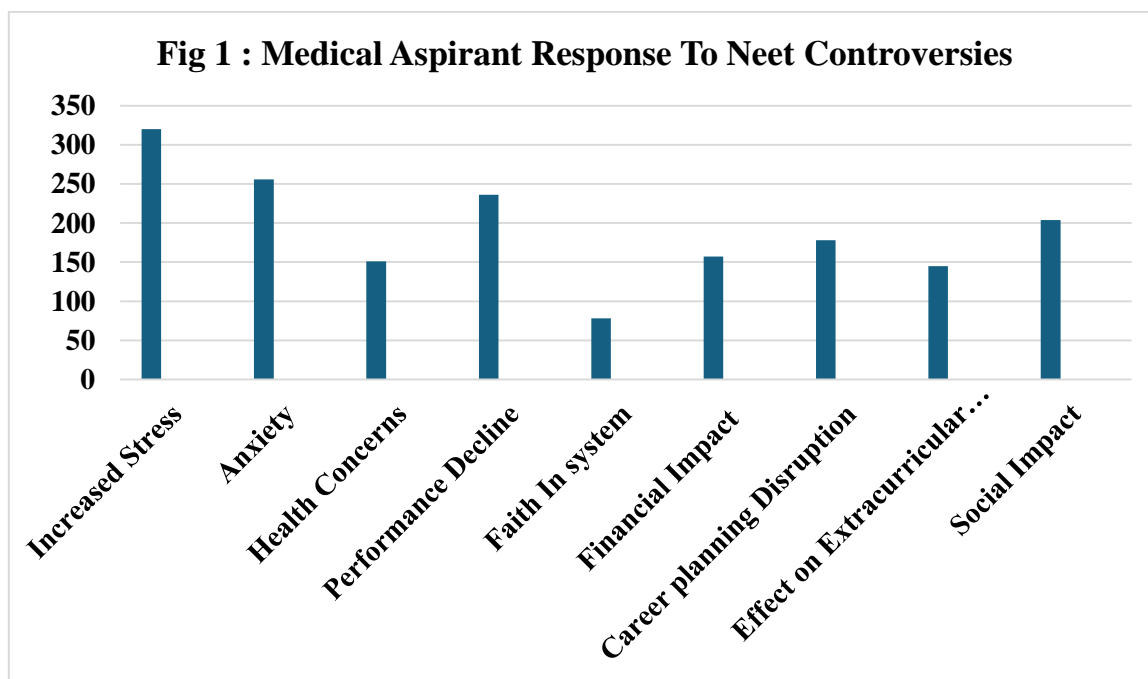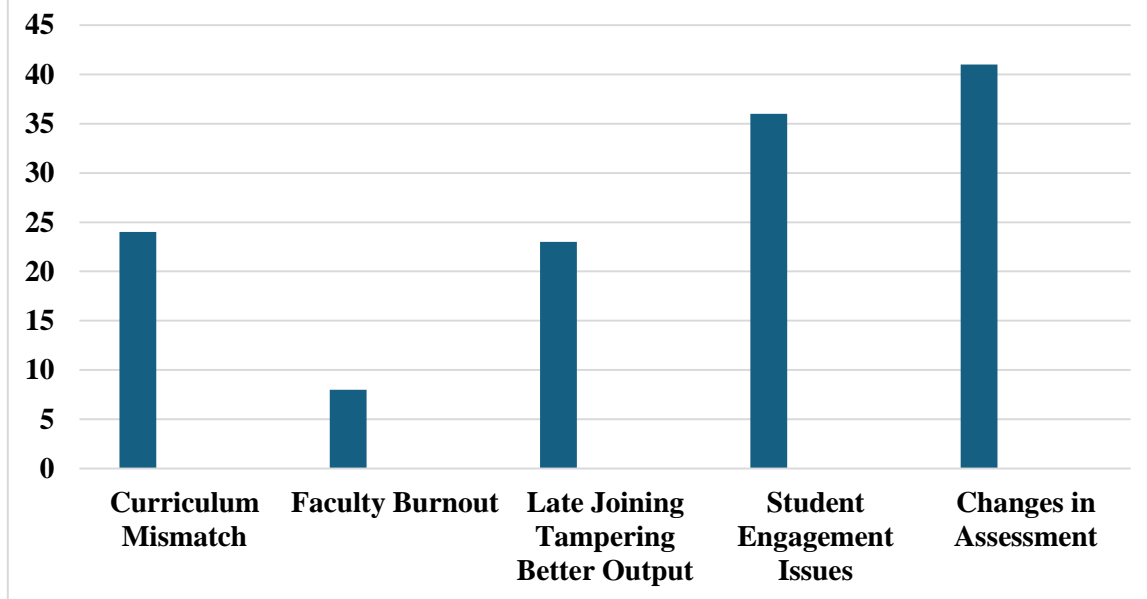
The aspirants are filled with determination and hope, when they believe in themselves.That one day, they could serve the community better. But the constant changes in NEET pattern can leave them with disappointment and rage.**"A today's medical aspirants is the future pillars of India and the entire society"**. Such events which leads to breakdown of aspirants at such tender age can lead to shattering of many dreams. To understand the impact of such events on aspirants and faculties, a brief view point is discussed below.

Aspirants Increasing Mental Health Issues:
64% of aspirants shows increased stress levels and **51% of aspirants shows** increased anxiety, directly attributing to controversies surrounding NEET examination. This clearly suggests that the ongoing issues surrounding NEET examination have developed feelings of uncertainty, distress and agony among the aspirants.

Aspirants Academic Performance:
47% of aspirants clearly states that their study schedule is adversely affected, primarily due to increased anxiety and stress, other reason being distraction from the ongoing disputes and changes implemented in the exams. These aspirants also mentioned that their mock exam scores and final exams scores have dropped by an average of **15%**. This clearly suggests that their is significant decline in an aspirant confidence and preparation.

Aspirant Switching Career Path or Quitting Medicine:
2% of the NEET aspirants also considered switching the career paths from medicine or quitting medicine due to factors like intense stress, performance pressure, and health concerns.

Aspirants Tragic Outcomes:
Aspirants addressed about the disappointment they face after not succeeding in this field. The society pressure, peer pressure or family pressure takes a toll in such aspirants.[3]

Faith In the System:
16% of the aspirants, have their faith in the system still intact. This is a disspointing and grievance statement to deliver that the future medicos who will be the backbone of the society has little to no faith in the medical system. They also believe that it is degrading every year with no scope of betterment in future.

Faculty Insights:
72% of the educators reported a noticeable decline in student confidence, with many students experiencing heightened anxiety, physical and mental instability. This environment has led to an increasing trend of exhaustion, as students choose to withdraw from programs or pursue alternative paths. A huge number of seats left vacant at PG level is noticed. In response to the mental health crisis, institutions have begun to modify their curriculum. They called for increased transparency and measures that could help restore student trust in the examination process, its governing bodies and stake holders.

DISCUSSION:
This study highlights how administrative delays, such as late result announcements and judicial interventions, contribute significantly to aspirants' stress. These

systemic inefficiencies disrupt students academic plans and exacerbate their anxiety, a trend similarly observed by Reddy and Iyer[7]. Such inconsistencies indicate a need for a streamlined process to maintain fairness and reduce unnecessary psychological burdens.

The pressures of preparing for NEET, combined with abrupt changes in exam patterns and schedules, profoundly affect students mental health. Das and Ghosh[8] documented similar findings, emphasizing the role of societal expectations in amplifying stress levels among medical aspirants. Additionally, Verma and Kumar[9] noted that long preparation periods, often extended due to system-induced delays, negatively impact students confidence and academic performance. Singh and Gupta[10] further highlighted how gaps in admission guidance can intensify these mental health challenges, leaving students feeling unsupported.

Our findings reveal that inconsistent cutoff scores and unclear reservation policies undermine trust in the NEET system. This aligns with Agarwal and Sharma[11], who found that vague admission criteria disproportionately affect marginalized students.

Similarly, Bose and Banerjee[12] discussed how inequities in medical entrance exams can disadvantage certain groups, calling for reforms to create a more inclusive and fair admission process.

The growing complexity of counseling procedures often results in students missing opportunities due to insufficient communication. Sharma[6] stressed that well-structured and accessible guidance is critical for aspirants during the admission phase.

Chopra and Jain[13] echoed this need, pointing out that greater transparency in competitive exams could help alleviate confusion and stress, allowing students to focus more on their preparation.

The increasing workload on educators due to changes in exam patterns also emerged as a key concern in this study. Gopalakrishnan and Das[14] added that this often leads to burnout, negatively impacting both teaching quality and faculty well-being. Addressing these issues is vital for sustaining high standards in medical education and supporting educators effectively.

The findings emphasize the importance of holistic reforms within the NEET system. Suggested measures include providing mental health support, simplifying admission processes, and ensuring transparent communication. Banerjee and Duflo[5] similarly advocated for structural reforms to address inefficiencies, which aligns with this study's recommendations. Additionally, Desai and Sharma[15] stressed that addressing psychological challenges in high-stakes exams like NEET is essential to safeguard students' well-being and promote academic success.

CONCLUSION:

NEET is considered as a gateway to serving the society. The trend has shown that there is a huge jump in taking up of medical seats despite of the gender. Every year lakhs of students appear to enter this nobel profession, many take unlimited drop years which can extend upto 6 – 7 drops just to qualify the NEET examination.

To address these challenges, it is essential for stakeholders to prioritize fairness, transparency, and accessibility within the NEET process. Educational institutions, regulatory bodies, and mental health professionals, should collaborate on comprehensive reforms, by focusing on.

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