

## Public health is under mental health risk: pandemic COVID-19 and stress among frontline health workers

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### ABSTRACT

COVID-19 put the public health system in an unprecedented emergency situation. The situation affects pillars of the public health care system i.e. front-line health workers. Both work pressure and fear of infection has grossly affected their mental health. They are in the high chance of mental health crisis due to the fear and stress. The article tries to find out the possible mental health issues faced by the frontline health workers in this pandemic situation.

*Keywords: COVID-19, Public Health, Mental Health, Frontline Health Workers*

Public Health is an empiric and multidisciplinary field which promotes and protects the health of the people and communities where they live, learn, work, and play and maintain a healthy life (American Public Health Association; Schmitt and Schmitt, 2008). COVID 19 has grossly affected almost all the countries of public health system across the globe. All sections of the population are in panic and mental stress. The first and foremost vulnerable sections are the front line health workers. Front line health workers include doctors, nurses, and paramedical workers. These front line health workers are more vulnerable to infections than the general population (Woodward, 2020). Health professionals including medical and paramedical staffs are working 24×7 to provide the best possible services to manage the pandemic. The work pressure, fear of infection, overtime workload, discrimination, lack of family support and social interaction, and exhaustion may lead to mental health problems among them. The situation may cause stress, anxiety, depression, insomnia, anger, fear and denial (Subudhi, 2020).

The reason for the vulnerability is: COVID-19 is highly contagious; health workers are dealing with multiple cases with the general public; lack of protective materials (PM) (Woodward, 2020; Fifield, 2020). Both health professionals and the health care systems are under extreme pressure across the globe (Brandon, 2020). For any kind of health-hazardous, these are people who are directly connected with the situation. Few topics of discussion are as follow;

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### ***Over workload***

The foremost reason for vulnerability is over workload. The over workload is due to an exponential increase in the patient rate with a short time, limited health care resources, and the life span of the COVID 19 patient is very short. Due to lack of time to go to the bathroom, the health workers were used to wear adult diapers and a seven-month pregnant nurse was in the work station to deal with the COVID patient (Fifield, 2020). Due to this workload, some of the health workers urged to quit the job.

### ***Physical Health***

The unforeseeable situation within the limited period increases the scarcity of PM like face masks, suits, and rubber gloves. The production of these items is also got affected due to pandemic. Health workers are wearing bin bags on their faces as protection (BBC News, 2020). Due to the long-time use of the protection apparels affect their skin also. Even most of the health workers treating the COVID patient without using the protective materials. Many of the doctors became ill due to this restless work.

### ***Social Isolation***

Due to workload they are detached from their social world including their family. They are unable to meet their family members for a long time. They are facing numerous problems. Now, a report is coming from India that health professionals are facing housing problems. They are being denied for houses on rent or landlords are forcing them to vacate their house as they are working in the hospital and dealing with COVID patients (Rao, 2020). Even health workers and their family members are ostracised by their neighbours and local populace (Rao, 2020).

### ***Health workers affected with COVID-19: A Global View***

Dr. Li Weanling was the first doctor who discovered and spread the news globally and died with the same disease after one month of his warning message. The medical professional is under a life-threatening situation. It is not only that they are suffering but also, they are losing their life. Some of the figures from highly affected countries are stated below:

- 1. Spain:** Six health workers lost their lives and about 12, 200 diagnosed as COVID 19 positive. Spain is having the highest positive cases among the health workers in the world (McMurtry, 2020).
- 2. Italy:** 61 doctors died due to COVID 19 and 8358 health workers have found COVID 19 positive (Sirna, 2020).
- 3. China:** Near about 3300 health workers have COVID 19 positive and eight medical workers have died including doctors (Woodward, 2020).
- 4. France:** 600 doctors are COVID 19 positive (Brandon, 2020).

### ***Health workers affected with COVID-19: An Indian Scenario***

In an interview with The Print newspaper, Prof. R V Asokan (general secretary, Indian Medical Association) has told nearly about 273 doctors have lost their life due to COVID (Dasgupta, 2020). Government has extending upto Rs. 50 lakh compensation to the doctors under government jobs but no compensation to others health staffs including private health workers (Dasgupta, 2020). The Times of India reported that, about 87 thousand health workers have infected with COVID-19 and already 573 have lost their life. Now their duty is a threat to their life as well as their family members. The state Maharashtra is having the highest number of deaths (more than 50% of total health workers) among the health workers (Dey, 2020).

## **DISCUSSION**

Stress among the frontline health staff: Health professionals including medical and paramedical staff are working 24x7 hours to provide the best services to manage the pandemic. The work pressure, fear of infection, overtime workload, discrimination, lack of family and social interaction, and exhaustion may lead to mental health problems among them. There is social isolation due to their present job style. The situation may cause stress, anxiety, depression, insomnia, anger, fear and denial (Lai et al., 2020). In this outbreak situation, it is high time to maintain positive mental health among front line health workers to have better control over this pandemic virus (Chen et al., 2020).

Now the medical professionals are under the ‘moral injury (Greenberg et al., 2020). Moral injury is the “psychological distress that results from actions, or the lack of them, which violate someone’s moral or ethical code” (Litz et al., 2009). As a result of which every fourth doctor and every fifth nurse are in either ill or self-isolation in the United Kingdom (UK) (Brandon, 2020). The lifesaver is under the life threat. In India, a group of five medical professionals including three doctors went into a locality for a sample collection from a woman suspect; but they were getting pelted with stones (Hindustan Times, 2020)

## **CONCLUSION**

They are under a severe crisis of both physical as well as mental health. They are severely ill, scared of infection, and social isolation. There is a high chance of triggering mental disorders among them. It’s not the first time that they are affecting but during the Ebola they were under the same stress. The concept of social distancing by the WHO is about two meters whereas a health worker is working with a COVID patient with less than 2 inches. The increased risk of the COVID among the FLHW will weaken the health care support system across the globe which has no alternatives. Even there is no concrete solution for them rather all should cooperate and following the guidelines given by the government. This would break the chain of spreading and result in less number of people getting infected. This reduces the increasing burden of the health care workers. WHO should have prepare a data base for the front line health workers those have COVID affected and extended the immediate support to those health workers families have death due to COVID 19.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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