



Nurses: A Vulnerable Group Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Nurses are the primary care providers at the bedside, spending much of their time with the patient they are expected to nurture to an optimal level of health and protect from harm. Unfortunately, the direct patient care and time spent with the patients place our Nation's heroes in the direct path of COVID-19, which makes our frontline nurses a vulnerable population. In addition, health workers working tirelessly to save lives and protect the community may also experience social distancing, changes in the behavior of family members, and stigmatization for being suspected of carrying COVID-19 even with proof of vaccination or negative tests. Therefore, it is crucial to best support nurses impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic to implement programs and strategies to help protect nurses from minimizing moral distress and burnout directly affected by COVID-19.

Keywords: Personal protective equipment; Healthcare providers; Social distancing

Introduction

According to the International Council of Nursing more than 600 nurses globally have died from COVID-19, and approximately 230,000 healthcare workers have contracted the virus [1]. On average, 7% of all cases of COVID-19 are among healthcare workers, which means that nurses and other staff are at significant personal risk", and so are the patients they care for" [1]. This data is alarming for several reasons, including the well-known worldwide shortage of nurses prior to the COVID-19 pandemic [2].

Nurses are the primary care providers at the bedside, spending much of their time with the patient they are expected to nurture to an optimal level of health and protect from harm. This shortage is primarily due to the baby boomers retiring and the increased number of sicker patients with multiple comorbidities entering the healthcare system [3].

However, there was a nursing shortage even before the COVID-19 outbreak became a pandemic. The United States population continues to expand while the availability of qualified nurses to provide healthcare decreases. According to, The World Health Organization, nursing is the largest occupational group in the health sector and accounts for approximately 59% of health professionals [4]. There is an additional need for 203,700 new RNs each year through 2026 to fill newly created positions and replace retiring nurses [3].

The direct patient care and time spent with the patients place our Nation's heroes in the direct path of COVID-19, which makes our frontline nurses a vulnerable population. The effects from COVID-19 directly impacting the health status of nurses on the frontline will only cause an increase in the shortage of nurses to provide care. The vulnerability of nurses providing direct patient care during the COVID-19 pandemic has serious health, economic, and personal/long-reaching or long-lasting consequences.

Issues Facing Nurses

Even before the pandemic, nurses have been overworked and undervalued in our healthcare industry. Nurses not only now have one of the most dangerous professions in the world, but they are a vulnerable population because they continue to work on the frontline and either takes seriously or steadfastly their oath and commitment to care for the sick and the injured. The issue nurses encounter can be considered a double-edged sword because the person who is the nurturer, protector, caregiver, and hero is also the very person who may be placing themselves at risk every day on the frontline.

The mental well-being of healthcare workers is worsening because of the increased stress and

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patient hospitalizations due to the overwhelming delta variant. Due to the pandemic, 64% of health care workers feel more stressed about their daily work responsibilities [5]. An alarming 89% of nurses feel that their mental health has been impacted by working on the frontlines of the pandemic over the last two years [5].

Health workers working tirelessly to save lives and protect the community may also experience social distancing, changes in the behavior of family members, and stigmatization for being suspected of carrying COVID-19 even with proof of vaccination or negative tests. With the rise in the positivity rates, the introduction of new variants, and growing anxiety related to the pandemic's outcome, everyone, especially Healthcare Providers, can expect these unwelcome behaviors from relatives and friends to only increase.

As a result, of the continued staff shortage and pandemic woes, nearly half of all healthcare workers consider leaving the profession. Providers, Nurses, Patient Care Technicians, and Paramedics are on the frontline risking their lives to fight the COVID-19 pandemic may be more at risk to develop mental health challenges, especially depression, anxiety, and Post Traumatic Stress. According to Javed et al. [6], many factors can have a negative impact, such as fear of catching a disease, long working hours, unavailability of protective gear and supplies, patient load, unavailability of effective COVID-19 medication, death of their colleagues after exposure to COVID-19, social distancing. In addition, isolation from their family and friends and the dire situation of their patients may take a negative toll on the mental health of health workers [6].

It is crucial to best support nurses impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic to implement programs and strategies to help protect nurses from minimizing moral distress and burnout directly affected by COVID-19.

Important issues or concerns to be addressed in regards to viewing nurses as a vulnerable population:

1. Address the issues of what is needed to optimally protect frontline nurses who care for others and may need support and care themselves. In part, the answer is to make nurses' healthcare a priority by ensuring better access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to keep us safe.

2. Address the issue of what influences the mindset and psyche of a nurse who may become isolated and quarantined from her profession, friends, and family. This pandemic certainly increases stress causing the nurse to continuously function and operate in a crisis mode day in and day out, further impacting their physical and mental health on and off the job.

As healthcare providers, nurses rely on the science and practices of modern medicine for healing and treatment. However, we have no answers to this current pandemic in today's world [7]. This new invisible enemy has invaded our personal space, and we have limited defenses against it. We must advocate and publicly voice the need for legislation to best protect us as frontline workers. We must demand to be heard and not fear facing backlash or retaliation from employers for speaking out because this pandemic has an actual physical and mental impact on those on the frontline. We will continue to advocate for services that support mental health programs for nurses dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, or other mental health challenges post COVID-19 and beyond.

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