

Editorial

OCCUPATIONAL CHALLENGES FACED BY HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS DEALING WITH COVID-19

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COVID-19 has proven itself as a major occupational challenge for Health Care Providers (HCP) in the year 2020. Health care professionals have shown a high tendency of contracting COVID-19 due to increased viral load with close contact of patients affected by this deadly virus.¹ Due to the pandemic of COVID-19, the majority of the health care providers are not only at risk of contracting this disease but are also playing a role of the potential risk of transmission to other colleagues, patients, friends and family.² According to World Health Organization (WHO), one in every 10th health care worker is affected by COVID-19 pandemic with varied rates worldwide.³ It has been reported that 90000 HCP were infected with COVID-19 in Italy, 9400 in Spain, 3300 in China and 490 in France.⁴ According to another report, in USA alone the number of health care workers affected with COVID-19 has reached to 9282.⁵ According to a report of Center of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), published on May 27th, 291 health care providers lost their lives to this infectious disease in one month.⁶

The health care workers in Asian region have also been affected by COVID-19, according to an international agency 12454 health care providers got infected with corona virus and 171 had died. In Pakistan alone, 3196 HCP have been infected and 35 deaths have been reported.⁷ In developing countries like Pakistan, major causes of high infection rates were poor understanding of the newly emerging disease, lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), unavailability of diagnostic tests and fear of disease among health care providers.⁸ Use of N95 masks by

the HCP way is declared as an essential protective measure by WHO.⁹ Serious public health measures were suggested by WHO, after reporting of 23 deaths of health care providers in China during this pandemic.^{10,11} Inadequate knowledge about disease, its transmission and management has led to an excessive rate of COVID-19 infection in HCP. In UAE, 61% of the health care workers had no knowledge about the transmission mode of COVID-19.¹² According to a study conducted in China, doctors had better knowledge about preventive strategies of COVID-19 as compared to nurses and paramedical staff which further increases chances of infection in this staff.¹³ According to another study conducted in India, only 45.4% of HCP were aware of the correct sequence for a mask application, and only 52.5% of participants were aware of the proper hand hygiene method for contaminated hands.¹⁴

During this pandemic of COVID-19, health care providers were not only affected by challenges on physical health but had a great impact on mental health as well.¹⁵ The psychological pressure on doctors has caused them to suffer from depression, anxiety, and even panic attacks in China.¹⁶ A qualitative study published in Lancet showed that this pandemic was associated with many stressors for health care providers. They were facing a challenge to work with a totally new epidemic with unknown treatment and lack of availability of vaccines. They were exhausted with the workload. Fear of infection and transmitting it to other loved ones was taking its toll on the mental health of HCP.¹⁷ Working with COVID-19 patients has a negative effect on health professional's sleep as well. According to a recent study, more than two-thirds of physicians reported sleeplessness (68.3%) and stress (93.7%)

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during this pandemic.¹⁸ Mental exhaustion was also reported in health care providers due to heavy workload, the pressure of using PPE continuously and feeling powerless to save patients.¹⁹ A study conducted in Pakistan reported that doctors suffered from excessive physical, mental and social stress during this pandemic. Many of them reported increased online work resulting in obesity and disturbance in their social life.¹ Death of patients and colleagues, non-availability of PPE, and lack of efficient management at hospitals were other reported stressors among the HCP.²⁰ In a study conducted in Pakistan, doctors also reported fear of rapid spread, the possibility of complications during management and missing the diagnosis.²¹

In this time of stress, special measures should be taken to provide comfort to our first line soldiers who are working day and night to protect communities. Health education should be provided to improve compliance with the use of N95 masks. Uninterrupted supply of masks and PPE should be ensured by the government. Lack of appreciation by higher officials and the negative impact of perceptions of the general population can cause further stress, creating a sense of desperation among the health care professionals (HCP). We should try to highlight the urgent need to focus on devising the strategies to alleviate the physical, mental, and social impact of COVID-19 on HCP.

WHO has recommended governments to ensure security and health protection of employees on the front line health service delivery globally. WHO has also recommended mental and psychosocial support for health professionals if needed in this period of stress.

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