US nurses speak on dangers of COVID-19 exposure at their workplaces

Katy Kinner
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New data released from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) show that more than 62,000 US health care workers have been infected with COVID-19, with deaths just short of 300. The CDC admits that these numbers are likely an underestimate due to low testing rates among health care workers. In addition, only 21 percent of those infected and surveyed identified their profession.

Nurses and other health care workers have been forced to work through the entirety of the pandemic under unsafe conditions with inadequate personal protective equipment (PPE), paltry sick days, and unorganized protocols. Nurses have protested across the globe, with recent protests erupting at 15 HCA Healthcare hospitals across the US. Many nurses have been reprimanded or fired for speaking out about unsafe conditions.

The WSWS spoke with nurses across the US about conditions in their workplaces and their thoughts on the new CDC data showing high rates of COVID-19 infections among health care workers.

Unless otherwise indicated, the nurses' names have been changed to protect their identity.

Julia, a labor and delivery nurse on the West Coast, gave permission to use her Facebook comments from a discussion surrounding the topic of rising infection rates among health care workers. She wrote: "The CDC says we should have N95 and goggles when a patient is pushing in the second stage (of labor). Our hospital isn't giving them to us. They are saying it's a regional thing, and they're looking into it."

She added, "My coworkers and I are pissed and feel frustrated. Management is saying that until regional higher ups decide that we should wear N95s and eye protection then we will continue wearing surgical masks. I started putting my own N95 mask from home under my surgical mask because it's better than nothing with any laboring patients who are huffing and puffing. I have to try my best to protect myself and my family."

Kendra, a medical-surgical nurse at a major hospital in the Midwest spoke about the poorly organized system of notifying nurses if they have been exposed to COVID-19. "I'm sure the CDC infection count is an underestimate. So many of us at work have been exposed and nothing has been done. There are rules stating that if you are exposed without proper PPE you are supposed to get tested and not go to work if you develop symptoms, but what if we never know we've been exposed?," she asked.

"In the beginning of the pandemic we were getting phone calls if you worked with a patient who later came down with COVID-19. Now, those occupational health centers have been overloaded or something because we don't get calls anymore and if we do it's weeks later. Imagine, in a few weeks, a nurse could have spread COVID to almost a hundred patients and coworkers. My friend works in the SICU (Surgical Intensive Care Unit), and she worked closely with a patient for a week before they were transferred to another unit and tested positive. My friend didn't find out from occupational health. She found out from a coworker who private messaged her on Instagram!"

Theresa, a home care attendant in Ohio, requested that her real name be used in this interview. She describes her title as "somewhere between a nurses' aide and a nurse." Theresa provides live-in care for a patient requiring 24-hour skilled nursing care.

When asked if PPE has been made available, Theresa said, "When the pandemic began, I remember reading an article from the *Columbus Dispatch* that included a quote from the Ohio State Department of Health that

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stated that home care providers do not need PPE. I was appalled. The department of health was telling us that we are supposed to ask our clients if they have a fever or if they have been exposed to COVID-19 and not to go into the home if they appear to be infected. First of all, I would lose my job if I did that. I couldn't just leave my client."

She added, "We haven't received any assistance for masks or gloves. You have to figure out how to get your own. You have to pay for it yourself."

Theresa also complained of a dangerous level of neglect on the part of her case manager, a point person who is responsible for checking in and assuring that the needs of the clients are being met. "It's been weeks and we haven't heard from the case manager. For all they know I'm not even showing up to care for my client. No one has checked in to find out if my client has the food he needs."

Theresa explained that her client pays for his care under a Medicaid waiver, which also includes a program that pays and oversees necessary home repairs. "There is a wall in my client's bedroom that is completely crumbling, but the case manager has taken weeks to respond. Now they are saying that they can't fix it since we are in this pandemic. But this is an essential service."

Theresa concluded by picturing what a second wave of the virus—widely expected by experts—would look like for her and her client. "There is more than enough evidence to know we shouldn't be reopening. It's going to require us to be home longer. He can only see his brothers through a screen door. He can't have his usual [in-person] therapy. To think about this continuing is super stressful for the client, which makes it stressful for the provider."

The lack of PPE, ventilators and sufficient staffing levels has outraged nurses, doctors, EMTs and other health care workers from the beginning of the pandemic. Despite the banners praising them as "heroes" and claims by politicians, hospital, pharmaceutical and insurance executives that "we're all in this together," health care workers have borne the health and psychological toll of this crisis, and to add insult to injury, many are now facing mass layoffs. Meanwhile the largest hospital chains have been the beneficiaries of the multitrillion-dollar corporate bailout, unanimously backed by both corporate-controlled parties.

The anger of health care workers over the criminal indifference to their safety and the lives of their patients is now merging with the growing outrage over the murder of George Floyd and other police killings and Trump's unconstitutional threats to use the military to crush protests. In a Twitter video viewed nearly 4 million times, New York City nurses are seen standing on sidewalks to cheer on passing protesters who, in return, thanked the health care workers for their sacrifices. In Minneapolis, nurses finishing their hospital shifts joined the protests to treat rubber bullet and tear gas injuries.

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