

# Mounting mental health crisis among US health care workers

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With coronavirus infections and deaths rising to astronomical heights over the past two months, frontline health care workers are increasingly experiencing acute mental and emotional distress.

Research studies have shed light on the dangerous mental health toll that is being exacted on health care workers, who are facing extreme physical demands as a result of the growth of the pandemic. In a new study by Mental Health America (MHA), health care workers were found to exhibit elevated levels of anxiety, stress and emotional exhaustion. The study was carried out in November, a month that saw the initial resurgence of the pandemic, overwhelming hospitals.

According to the MHA survey, 93 percent of health care workers were experiencing stress, while around 86 percent reported anxiety produced by the sudden overflow of sick patients. Some 77 percent reported feeling frustrated with their working conditions, and a similar percentage experienced physical exhaustion and burnout. Paralleling the extreme strain on hospitals all across the country, 75 percent of workers said they were overwhelmed.

The survey revealed widespread worry about contracting and spreading the deadly virus. Among health care workers, 76 percent reported that they were worried about exposing their children to COVID-19, and nearly half were worried about exposing their spouse or partner. Another 47 percent were concerned about exposing their older adult relatives.

Many health care workers said the pandemic left them feeling emotionally isolated and alienated in their workplaces, as well as having to cope with severe consequences in their home life.

A significant 38 percent of health care workers said they did not feel that they had adequate emotional support. Among nurses, the number was 45 percent. Among workers with children, half reported that they were

lacking quality time with their children or were unable to be a consistently present parent.

In the introduction to the survey, MHA wrote that workplace conditions are “getting worse by the day and health care workers aren’t getting a reprieve.” Health care workers are feeling “frustrated, anxious... and worried about exposing their loved ones.” Given the extraordinary amount of stress placed on health care workers, many are at risk of developing even more severe mental health conditions such as depression and even thoughts of suicide or self-harm.

This phenomenon is mirrored in the general population, with alarming increases in reports of depression and anxiety nationwide. Psychological screenings showed a 634 percent jump in anxiety for the nation from January, and depression soared 873 percent.

For health care workers, however, the deterioration of mental wellness due to the pandemic has been accompanied by greater risks. Countless research studies have shown, even before the pandemic, that physicians were at increased risk of suicide compared to the broader population. While research has not revealed a causal link between worsening conditions due to the pandemic and cases of suicide, there is a high correlation between health care workers’ suicide risk and an exacerbation of job-related stressors from the virus.

According to the Psychology Health Center of Excellence, a clinical resource center, these job-related stressors include significant workload changes as a result of the growth of the pandemic, and the inability of hospitals to manage rapidly increasing nurse-to-patient ratios.

Many health care workers have also found it extremely difficult to obtain and maintain effective personal protective equipment. Amid the massive scale of death from the pandemic, now close to 360,000, many health care workers have also been traumatized by their

experiences in intensive care wards, often witnessing scores of patients falling victim to the virus with little ability to save them.

Because of the tremendous influx of COVID-19 patients and the dilapidated state of health care infrastructure, workers have been forced to confront the terrifying issue of rationing care, choosing which patients should be left to die. This is similar to the crisis in New York last spring, when it was the main hotspot of the pandemic.

Adding to the mental health crisis has been the staggering increase in positive tests for health care workers. According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there have been at least 287,000 COVID-19 infections among health care workers in the US.

Hospitals and medical facilities nationwide are being inundated with COVID-19 patients, countless ICU wards have filled beyond capacity, and states have been forced to build impromptu and makeshift facilities to deal with the extreme demand. Moreover, staffing shortages and burnout conditions are leading to severe strains on what was an already devastated health care infrastructure and severely overworked staff.

More than 3,000 health care workers have died from COVID-19. In most cases, these deaths are the result of shortages of PPE and the cover-up by hospital management of the spread of the virus.

Central responsibility for the spread of the virus in hospitals and clinics lies with the inability of capitalism and the profit-driven health care system. Both big business parties failed to enact the most elementary scientific measures to contain the transmission of COVID-19. Since March, the main priority of the Democratic and Republican parties has been to pump unlimited cash into the financial markets and increase the wealth of the super-rich.

Instead of devoting more resources to cash-strapped hospitals for more PPE, nursing staff and testing and contract tracing for health care workers, the capitalist class and its political flunkies have aggressively promoted the homicidal “herd immunity” policy, which in practice means resuming non-essential production and in-person school learning, while ensuring that nothing impinges on the fortunes of the ruling class.

To cut costs, hospitals are implementing the bare minimum in safety protocols, even if it means endangering the health of health care workers. At St. Mary’s Medical Center in Duluth, Minnesota, health care workers who treat COVID-19 patients are required to

reuse their respirator masks up to six times before discarding them. Although N95 masks are typically sterilized daily, they invariably begin to sag after two or three shifts and leave gaps through which the virus can enter. One cardiac nurse at the hospital described the situation to the *New York Times* as “driving a car without seatbelts.”

In Chicago, nurses have complained of not receiving N95 masks that properly fit their faces. Speaking to the *Times*, one nurse at Community First Medical Center blamed the shortage of appropriate gear for the deaths of at least three nurses who contracted the virus at the hospital this past spring and summer. A recent survey by the volunteer organization Get Us PPE noted that 90 percent of frontline workers said they are repeatedly reusing masks designed for single use.

Even though the need for necessary medical equipment has become more dire than it was in early spring, President-elect Joe Biden has provided no indication of how the large distribution campaign that has been promised will actually be implemented, nor has he addressed the monopolized health care distribution system, which allows wealthy hospital chains to hoard medical supplies. Instead, he has proposed creating “financial incentives” and “buy American” policies for major companies. This translates into providing subsidies, cheap loans and other hand-outs to large corporations to drive profits even higher.

In contrast to the social suffering and death hitting the broad mass of the population, the health care industry and its wealthy executives have seen their profits increase to record-breaking levels. Billionaires in the health care industry had their wealth increase by 36 percent between early April and late July, from \$402 billion to \$548 billion in less than four months, according to a report by UBS and PricewaterhouseCoopers. Biden and the Democratic Party, loyal representatives of Wall Street and the financial aristocracy, will continue the policy of placing profits above social need and human life.



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