

# Health care workers face mental health crisis as the result of pandemic disaster

Shelby Michaels

28 June 2021

We are seeing “the great resignation” in health care.

Studies show three-tenths of health care workers are looking for new jobs. We ran on adrenaline for a year, burning the candle at both ends. Now we are empty and have nothing but time to reflect on the tragedy. The many lonely deaths witnessed left us traumatized. We remember feeling scared, unprotected and let down by our administration, who didn’t value us enough for a plastic gown. Every day a new direction and our lives, our families’ lives and our patients’ lives were caught in the balance. I will never be the same person as I was before this pandemic. I will never forget that management hid in offices and made decisions that I was not worth the value of a paper mask. I have never felt more strongly that nurses are not [considered] valuable. Every day I showed up and gave my whole heart to those who were scared and alone. I held their hand with empathy, knowing that their fate was inevitable. If you were a prostitute, a politician, a lawyer, a drug dealer, it didn’t matter. I would care for you, giving everything I had.

I am realizing that I am the one that is treated without care.

— *Erin, a nurse in Riverside, California*

The coronavirus pandemic has lasted for more than 15 months, severely impacting not only the physical but the mental health of the vast majority of the world’s population. While almost 4 million people have died globally, hundreds of millions more have experienced overwhelming levels of stress, loss, economic anxiety, depression, isolation and uncertainty.

In few other fields have workers been exposed to such high levels of stress as in health care. Health care

workers, especially those on the frontline, have faced increased work hours, shortages of lifesaving personal protective equipment (PPE) and endless exposure to patient deaths. Large numbers of their colleagues have also died fighting to save lives.

During the first year of the pandemic, more than 3,600 health care workers died in the United States, according to the ongoing study, “Lost on the frontline,” by Kaiser Health News and the *Guardian* newspaper. Nurses and health care support specialists accounted for the largest share of these deaths. More than 700 died in New York and New Jersey alone, the study found.

While the report outlines a shocking scale of death among health care workers, these statistics are not comprehensively tracked by the government, and the authors of the study suggest the true toll is higher.

Many of these deaths were the product of a direct failure of hospital administrators and governments to procure adequate supplies of masks and other personal protective gear, lack of mass testing and contact tracing, inadequate safety measures at workplaces, and refusal to implement necessary public health measures like lockdowns and restrictions until COVID-19 was successfully contained.

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, “essential workers” are more likely to report symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder, substance use and suicidal thoughts during the pandemic. Many current studies of health care workers are showing increased rates of post-traumatic symptoms among those workers caring for COVID-19 patients, with nurses being more often adversely impacted than doctors.

Psychiatrist Dr. Julian Lagoy at Community Psychology in California explained to Healthline: “Generally, PTSD trauma is defined as being exposed to a traumatic event, such as a sexual assault, war, a car accident, or child abuse. However, the current COVID-19 pandemic has qualities that qualify as a traumatic experience as it takes

a physical and emotional toll on many people."

In 2019, a review of available literature by *The Journal of the Missouri State Medical Association* found that burnout among health care workers was endemic even before the pandemic. After a year of exposure to massive deaths and increasing staffing shortages, burnout has certainly increased, and many health care workers are reaching a breaking point.

According to a survey by the Vivan Health website, in 2021, 43 percent of respondents considered leaving the health care profession in 2021. By comparison, at the start of the pandemic, 80 percent of respondents said they were likely to continue working in their field. Additionally, a staggering 87 percent of respondents now say that their hospitals or facilities are, on average, short staffed.

Data from staffing firm Aya Healthcare shows that such results are already being reflected in mass vacancies within the health care system. One year into the pandemic, permanent nurse vacancies have skyrocketed, with job postings at hospitals and health systems up 20 percent compared to the start of the pandemic.

These conditions are not isolated to the United States but are part of the international impact of the pandemic. In the United Kingdom, thousands of doctors plan to leave the National Health Service after the pandemic due to exhaustion and mental health concerns, according to a report released in May by the British Medical Association. The report finds that the number of UK doctors seeking early retirement has doubled, and 25 percent are more likely to take a break from their profession.

The disastrous state of health care is the result of decades of cuts to public and private health systems. Years of cost-cutting measures mean that the medical system has fewer resources to confront the worst global health crisis in a century. Health care systems in the US are both publicly and privately funded and lack proper coordination to treat the needs of society effectively and holistically.

Hospitals are still experiencing impacts from the virus with continued increasing staff shortages. In May of this year, Oregon State Hospital had to call in the National Guard for help with treating severely mentally ill patients. The hospital is chronically understaffed, by as much as 30 percent.

Despite a rising number of vaccinations, numbers are far below what is required for herd immunity, even in advanced countries. The more infectious and deadly Delta variant of the coronavirus is present in at least 80

countries, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). In the US, it accounts for at least 10 percent of all new cases and is probable to soon become the dominant variant, according to the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Rochelle Walensky. There exists the danger of new surges of the virus as the Delta variant spreads, as well as the threat of COVID-19 becoming an ongoing endemic lasting for years, so long as policy decisions remain in the hands of the profit-driven ruling class.

In response to the deadly, stressful and unsafe conditions facing health care workers, exacerbated by the pandemic, nurses, hospital workers, and other health professionals have gone on strike throughout the world over the last year. Recently, health care professionals throughout India have been on strike, including thousands of doctors, health care teachers and hospital workers.

Earlier this year, hundreds of doctors went on a 24-hour strike in Israel, midwives went on a one-day strike in France, and health care workers in Bolivia also went on strike. In May, 30,000 New Zealand public sector nurses voted to strike, while in Massachusetts, 700 nurses at Saint Vincent Hospital have been striking for weeks over patient care and unsafe conditions.

While trillions of dollars have been handed out to the major banks to weather the economic fallout from the pandemic, vital frontline health care professionals face death, sickness, burnout and poor conditions that have led them to the brink.

Health care workers worldwide have suffered immensely under the decaying capitalist health care system that was ill prepared for a global pandemic. It is time for health care workers and all workers to fight for a rational, science-based plan to suppress the virus, based on putting human lives before profits.

*We call on health care workers to write in with their own stories about the conditions they face in their workplace. Contact us today.*



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