

Nurse's letter exposes catastrophic COVID conditions in Sri Lankan hospitals

A letter from a nurse
18 August 2021

The WSWs is publishing below a letter from a government hospital nurse in Sri Lanka describing her bitter experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Her name has been withheld to avoid possible victimisation.

I am a nurse at a main hospital in the central province. I want to inform you about the difficult working conditions and experiences I, and other health workers, are now facing following the resurgence of the pandemic wave last month.

Last month, after 40 members of hospital security service were found to have been infected with COVID-19, staff in our ward were also tested. Many of them were found to be infected. Following this situation, patients in the ward were subjected to PCR tests. Fifteen out of 19 patients had been infected over a two-week period.

The first group found to be infected were sent to the coronavirus ward at Peradeniya hospital. Other infected patients, discovered later, were kept in our ward.

Ongoing attempts over several weeks to find a place at a hospital specially allocated for coronavirus infected patients were in vain. This means that other institutions have been overwhelmed with coronavirus patients.

That is how the ward I am working suddenly became a ward treating pandemic-affected patients.

Hospital authorities failed to conduct PCR tests on the rest of the staff, to find out whether they were also infected. Is it because of the unscientific approach to COVID-19 by health authorities or is it because of government manoeuvres to keep us continuously working and cover up the real situation?

Staff in the ward were forced to work in the presence of these infected patients. There were some days when we had to work for 18 hours straight, from 7 p.m. until 1 p.m. the next day. However, because of the prevailing conditions in the hospital, there was no possibility of

going home after working 6 or 12 hours.

At times we did not even have enough time to drink some water or go to the toilet because in order to get there we had to pass through other coronavirus wards. There was no possibility of going to another ward because they had infected patients and other ward staff were fearful of us.

We were forced to sleep on a shift basis, and wearing face masks, during this entire period. We also had to postpone bathing or going to the toilet until we got home. Our restroom was within the ward itself. You can imagine the dangers.

It should also be stated that we were forced to travel home on common transport and without any cleaning. There are no outdoor washrooms or changing rooms. The government does not care about our transport or the danger of us spreading the virus to others.

Whilst treating coronavirus patients, I was forced to lead an isolated life at home. I was not only prevented from spending time with my three kids but also not allowed to cook meals. At times, we were also asked to work in out-patient departments due to nurse shortages.

We spent our time almost without slumber, out of fear that we would be infected, and our lives threatened. I also suffered from sleep disturbance due to this fear. We are, in fact, exhausted and under stress.

Only by chance have I not been infected. Nurses here have not been provided with personal protective equipment (PPE) and are working with low-standard KN-95 face masks because the hospital does not give us proper N-95 masks.

It was sad and unbearable to see how our patients were suffering. We were not allowed to properly attend to patients' needs. When working in a normal ward we go and help patients if they are vomiting or have any other problem. We couldn't do that here.

One of my colleagues at a hospital allocated for the coronavirus-infected told me that there were frequent shocking scenes of patients dying without oxygen, like people drowning in water.

A few days ago, coronavirus patients said to have “recovered” were sent back home. They were only given rapid antigen tests, which are not a sure testing system. Who knows whether they had all “recovered”?

The ward has now been reopened with other patients. Last week, another doctor was found to be infected through a PCR test. I think a new round of the pandemic has started but it is now proposed to keep COVID patients in the wards themselves because there are no other places.

These experiences are not confined to me or just in the hospital where I work. Because there were no separate places for the COVID-19 infected patients among the inmates of the psychiatric ward at the Kandy General Hospital, nurses there were forced to spend time with them.

Staff were not subjected to any PCR testing. A friend told me that they have become “laboratory mice” in order to find whether the coronavirus can infect people using the limited protective equipment provided.

She also said that they had to work around the clock in the wards like us. Three nurses who went to the restroom passing through the coronavirus ward became infected and I learnt that their family members were also infected. Irrespective of government’s boastings, I believe that the lives of health workers and their families are now under the shadow of death.

Authorities are now attempting to send the overburdened nurses to Neville Fernando Hospital and the Kotelawala Defence University Hospital (KDUH), which is situated about 100 kilometres away. They are using a raffle system to forcibly transfer the nurses because they do not like this and are opposed to going there.

It was recently discovered that wards allocated for COVID-19 patients at KDUH were not properly or regularly cleaned and so many nurses serving there became infected.

There is enormous shortage of health staff because the government has not recruited new nurses, or other frontline workers, during the recent period. Even during this health emergency with a deadly and contagious virus taking its toll in this country and others, the

government has not expanded the public hospital system.

While patient numbers are increasing because the government is letting the disease spread, it is also attempting to exploit us to the core by not even providing PPE. At the same time, trade union officials are involved in drawing up shift time-tables to facilitate the government’s efforts.

If a full-scale lockdown is not implemented, the entire health system will definitely collapse because most of health workers will become infected or die. This will make the situation even more disastrous for people who become infected from the rapidly spreading pandemic which is now taking hundreds of lives.



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