

“Coworkers will feel his loss deeply, but Kaiser will have his shift filled before his body is in the ground”

California nurse dies by suicide while on shift in emergency room

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Are you a nurse? We want to hear from you: Tell us about the conditions at your hospital and what you think about this tragedy. Comments will be published anonymously.

A nurse at Kaiser's Santa Clara Medical Center died by suicide this week while at work in the emergency room. Sources told *NBC Bay Area* that the nurse brought a loaded gun to work and on Wednesday night tragically shot and killed himself halfway through his shift.

The nurse has not yet been named, but reports by coworkers on social media confirm the nurse carried out the suicide in the supply room while he was on shift, and that the event took place in front of a coworker. Kaiser reported that during the investigation ambulances were diverted to nearby hospitals while the ER remained open for walk-in patients.

The suicide took place as 5,000 nurses at Stanford Health Care and Lucile Packard Children's Hospital are on strike in the San Francisco Bay area. These nurses are fighting for safe staffing, wage increases, safer working conditions and mental health services. They are leading a counteroffensive after years of burnout and overwork in the country's hospital system which has left countless nurses and health care workers overwhelmed.

News of the horrific suicide has sent shock throughout health care workers, which many are referring to as “yet another” on-shift nurse suicide.

One nurse who works at Kaiser Santa Clara told the WWSW that “Kaiser is notoriously bad with their mental health services, so this is obviously not a good

look for them. Nothing will change. Nurses are burnt out and COVID highlighted how undervalued our labor is and we are nothing but a commodity to hospitals. The sad thing is his coworkers will feel his loss deeply but Kaiser will have his shift filled before his body is in the ground without addressing the bigger issue which is their abysmal mental health services for their patients and staff.”

High rates of burnout and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) plague the profession as giant hospital chains prioritize profits over saving lives. A recent study published by the CDC showed that more than 70 percent of health care workers in the US suffer from anxiety and depression, 38 percent have symptoms of PTSD and 15 percent have had recent thoughts of suicide or self-harm.

Read more: “Behind the mental health crisis in nursing: Testimonial from a traveling California nurse”

Even before the pandemic hit, a 2019 report by Judy Davidson, a UC San Diego nursing and psychiatry researcher found that nurse suicides were 41 percent higher for male nurses and nearly 58 percent higher for female nurses as compared to the general population.

Facing continued waves of the pandemic and mass infection among staff and coworkers, nurses have suffered gravely on the front lines and suicides remain at an all time high. In December 2020 an ICU nurse in Southern California told the WWSW that she felt like she was experiencing “an endless conveyor belt of death.”

Tragically, in January, just thirty minutes away at

Stanford Health Care, travel nurse Michael Odell committed suicide in the middle of his shift. Odell, like many nurses, had previously struggled under the weight of the physical and emotional toll of the pandemic. In April 2020 he made his first suicide attempt. He then took a long hiatus from nursing and surrounded himself with support from friends, family and attended therapy. He then planned to reenter the nursing field in January 2022 as a travel nurse at Stanford Health Care on the cusp of the Omicron wave.

Odell reportedly walked out of his shift early that morning. His body was later found by the Alameda County Sheriff's Office dive team in waters near San Francisco's Dumbarton Bridge.

During three months ending in February 2022 Omicron caused 80 million new infections compared to the 3.3 million to 6.6 million monthly cases during the Delta wave which began in the winter of 2020, according to data from the CDC.

The mass infection policies pursued by the Trump administration and continued by Biden forced the reopenings of schools and workplaces, creating the conditions for the virus to spread with minimal restraint. Moreover, the conscious and criminal decisions made by the ruling class not to pursue a Zero-COVID policy ensured the development of COVID-19 mutations, and continuous waves of infection which pummeled health care systems, driving health care workers from the profession in droves.

Before his death, Odell wrote on social media about his experience working as a nurse during the pandemic. In one post he spoke about his COVID-19 patients: "I feel for them as deep as human empathy can allow, but I fear the long-term effects this may have on every clinical worker navigating this pandemic and in these situations. Please don't think me selfish; I get that my level of 'suffering' cannot compare to what these patients and their families are experiencing. But the fact is that I have an amazing support system and people who love me and tell me frequently that they do; I fear for those who do not."

The deep tragedy is that had the proven elimination policies called for by leading Zero-COVID scientists and physicians been carried out, there would never have been a Delta or Omicron wave. Not only would health care workers not be leaving the profession and carrying out tragic acts of suicide, but millions of lives

would have been spared.

The Biden administration, meanwhile, is requesting \$33 billion in military funding to Ukraine, while funding to fight the pandemic has all but dried up, under the false pretext that the pandemic is "over." This amount would have been a sufficient start to begin carrying out the policies to build hospitals, create and distribute the highest quality of PPE, support workers through lockdowns and put billions toward temporary high quality online education.

A striking Stanford nurse told the WWSWS, "In our strike right now a big issue that nurses want to fight for is better mental health benefits. It should be a given that mental health resources for nurses are provided by the hospitals, but free counseling is not the central issue.

"There must be a major shift in the health care industry. The pandemic must be brought to an end, we nurses are at the forefront of a larger crisis, our patients are desperate, sometimes homeless, mentally unstable and where this nurse was in the ED things are much worse. Our patients cry because they can't afford their care, we have lost so many to COVID, not just patients but coworkers, friends and family. All the while we continue to face abuse through short staffing because the hospitals keep just barely enough staff and we never have enough resources. It's all of this that needs to change. No amount of counseling sessions are going to resolve this."

A powerful movement of health care workers is breaking out. From Stanford to Cedars Sinai, the University of Michigan and Sutter Health, health care workers are fighting back throughout the world. These struggles create the conditions for a broader offensive by the working class to end the subordination of lives and health to private profit, and finally bring the pandemic to an end. A humane and scientific approach which devotes the needed resources to eliminating COVID-19 will not only save countless lives from the virus, but prevent further tragedies as that which occurred last week in Santa Clara.



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