The mental health of health workers in the pandemic

Increased readiness to discuss sensitive topics will play a key role in alleviating the psychological stress on health workers responding to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Andréia Azevedo Soares reports.

For Dr Flávia Machado, what happened in Manaus was a wake-up call. Head of the intensive care unit at the Federal University of São Paulo, Brazil, Machado watched the situation unfold in the capital of Amazonas state, northwestern Brazil, with a mixture of alarm and disbelief.

“The spike in COVID-19 cases back in January exposed a severe lack of medical oxygen in the system,” she says. “It really brought home to me and my team the possibility that we too might be receiving patients we cannot treat.”

Machado says that if nothing changes her team could soon be without the sedatives and neuromuscular blocker agents it needs to ventilate coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) patients. “This is the worst situation we have ever faced,” she adds. “And it is causing a lot of anxiety, depression and sleepless nights.”

What is true of Machado and her team is true for health professionals worldwide. While accounts of health systems pushed beyond their limits by the pandemic have tended to focus on the plight of patients and their families, health workers are suffering too.

“Health workers are being subjected to strains that include but are by no means limited to working long hours, sometimes without appropriate personal protective equipment, increased exposure to patient suffering and death,” says Dr Aiysha Malik, a mental health expert working in the Department of Mental Health and Substance Use at the World Health Organization (WHO).

The impact such stresses are having on health professionals is beginning to emerge in research that includes a cross-sectional study published in *JAMA Network Open* which revealed that 71.5% (899 of 1257 participants) of health workers treating COVID-19 patients in Chinese hospitals reported psychological distress, while around half reported symptoms of depression and anxiety. Just over a third (427 participants) reported suffering symptoms of insomnia.

A study published in the May issue of the *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* paints a similar picture. Performed right after the first wave of COVID-19 in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the study found just under half (561 of 1194 individuals) of staff reported clinically significant anxiety and depression.

As health systems struggle to cope with rising COVID-19 case numbers, many of them lacking the human and material resources they need, stakeholders ranging from hospital managers to civil society organizations are implementing measures designed to alleviate the pressure on health workers while increasing their capacity to cope.

How best to achieve these different aims is a matter of debate. “At the moment we’re seeing a lot of different strategies to promote and protect the mental well-being of health workers, but good quality data and more research is needed to get a clear idea of how well those strategies actually work,” says Malik.

One of the biggest challenges faced is the lack of mental health workers in many countries, below two per 100,000 of population in low-income countries and a global median of nine per 100,000.

Reflecting this reality, guidance published by different agencies, including interim guidance published by WHO and the International Labour Organization in February 2021, emphasizes the importance of implementing changes in working conditions.

For some commentators this emphasis represents a helpful development. Among them is Dr Julian Eaton, a psychiatrist at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. “We need to be careful about the idea that the only way that you support health-care workers is by providing counselling or psychological support,” he says, adding that one of the key findings of the *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* study was that lack of access to personal protective equipment increased the likelihood of mental distress. “It follows that making sure the health workers are protected is going to help their mental health,” he says.

Malik takes the same view. “Ensuring access to appropriate personal protective equipment or the knowledge on how to use it is not a psychosocial intervention per se but could have a
A mental health worker offers online counselling in Pakistan while caring for a sick parent.