

Blueprint to protect the mental health of frontline medical workers

May 6 2020



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University of Queensland researchers have developed a set of recommendations to manage the mental health of frontline medical workers during viral outbreaks, such as COVID-19.

Associate Professor Dan Siskind said employers can use several practical steps to minimize mental health impacts.

"These include clear communication, providing training and education, enforcing infection control procedures, ensuring adequate supplies of protective equipment and providing access to [psychological interventions](#)," Dr. Siskind said.

"The recommendations should be supplemented with simple changes to medical practice.

"Implementing screening stations to direct patients to relevant infection treatment clinics, redesigning high-risk procedures and reducing the number of patients in hospital wards will all help to protect the mental health of frontline workers."

Researchers developed the recommendations after analyzing 59 international studies on the [psychological effects](#) of treating viral outbreaks.

They found clinicians who were younger, in a junior role, parents of dependent children or had an infected family member were at greater risk of psychological distress.

Longer periods of quarantine, lack of practical support and stigma were also negative contributors.

"Although psychological distress is expected when staff are under pressure to look after large numbers of potentially infectious patients, employers can assist by making these recommended changes," Dr. Siskind said.

The study's lead author Professor Steve Kisely said supervisors should

consider staff needs when assigning duties—especially if staff had been redeployed to meet rising clinical demands—and where possible, make redeployment voluntary.

"Staff need regular breaks and appropriate rosters, so they can access food and other daily living supplies, and make video contact with their families to alleviate concerns," Professor Kisely said.

"They may also need alternative accommodation to reduce the risks of infecting their families." The studies considered [staff](#) impacts during SARS, MERS, H1N1, H7N9, Ebola and COVID19 in countries that included; China, Taiwan, Canada, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Greece, Mexico, Japan, The Netherlands, Germany and Liberia. This paper was published in the *British Medical Journal*.

More information: Steve Kisely et al. Occurrence, prevention, and management of the psychological effects of emerging virus outbreaks on healthcare workers: rapid review and meta-analysis, *BMJ* (2020). [DOI: 10.1136/bmj.m1642](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m1642)

Provided by University of Queensland

Citation: Blueprint to protect the mental health of frontline medical workers (2020, May 6) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-05-blueprint-mental-health-frontline-medical.html>

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