

Too sick to work? Global survey captures behavior of healthcare and non-healthcare workers

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International survey shows that most workers would continue to work when sick with flu-like symptoms, according to a study published May 13, 2020 in the open-access journal *PLOS ONE* by Ermira Tartari from the International Society of Antimicrobial Chemotherapy Infection and Prevention Control (ISAC-IPC) Working Group and colleagues.

Working while sick is a reality for workers across sectors and countries, for reasons including lack of paid [sick leave](#), [work culture](#), and individual judgement. Against the backdrop of the current COVID-19 crisis, this behavior clearly warrants challenging—especially as it manifests in the [healthcare](#) industry, considering the potential for transmission of respiratory disease between patients and [healthcare staff](#).

In order to better understand the phenomenon of working while sick for [healthcare workers](#) and non-healthcare workers alike, Tartari and colleagues conducted an opt-in cross-sectional online survey of the members and international networks of the International Society of Antimicrobial Chemotherapy (ISAC) Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) Working Group from October 2018-January 2019.

In total, 533 respondents from 49 countries participated—of these, 249 were healthcare workers (46.7 percent) and 284 non-healthcare workers (53.2 percent). A clear majority from both groups (99.2 percent of healthcare workers and 96.5 percent of non-healthcare workers) would work through "minor" symptoms like a sore throat, sneezing/runny nose, or cough. 58.5 percent of respondents stated they'd continue to work when sick with an influenza-like illness (including major symptoms like

muscle aches and fever), with no significant variation between healthcare workers and non-healthcare workers.

Healthcare workers did significantly diverge in some ways: 26.9 percent of healthcare workers would continue to work even when experiencing a fever (one of the most major symptoms), compared with 16.2 percent of non-healthcare workers; similarly, only 45.8 percent of healthcare workers would avoid a colleague exhibiting influenza-like symptoms, compared with 60.9 percent of non-healthcare workers. Healthcare workers were also more willing to receive the [influenza vaccine](#) (81.1 percent, versus 56.7 percent of non-healthcare workers).

Though this study is limited by the fact that the participants were self-selected, with 90 percent of respondents coming from high-income countries, the results are concerning, since over half of both healthcare and non-healthcare workers report being willing to continue working through major influenza symptoms, despite international guidelines. In the midst of a pandemic, future strategies to prevent the transmission of influenza-like illnesses in work settings—especially healthcare, where workers often care for immunocompromised patients—are crucial, and the authors note that a broad cultural change is required, in addition to sufficient sick leave and access to the influenza vaccine.

The authors add: "At the time of the present COVID pandemic it is important to realize that healthcare workers, despite feeling moderately sick during flu seasons, feel the obligation to work."

More information: Tartari E, Saris K, Kenters N, Marimuthu K, Widmer A, Collignon P, et al. (2020) Not sick enough to worry? "Influenza-like" symptoms and work-related behavior among healthcare workers and other professionals: Results of a global survey. *PLoS ONE* 15(5): e0232168. doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0232168

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