Lessons from the COVID-19 front line captured in 'Health Worker Voices' project

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Led by researchers in the Nossal Institute for Global Heath at the University of Melbourne, the project is analysing the stories and collating key lessons about health systems' responses to the pandemic

across a range of places and over different time periods.

Arising from the lessons learned during the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2014-16, the project also aims to enable frontline workers to feel heard. The World Health Organization (WHO) said engaging with and supporting health workers was key to overcoming the outbreak and it believes these insights are crucial in fighting COVID-19.

University of Melbourne lead researcher Daniel Strachan said that during the current pandemic it is critical to find novel ways to engage with healthcare workers and discover, in real time and without filtering, what their frustrations, obstacles, triumphs and difficulties are.

"We want to know what helps and what works well during these crises. Healthcare workers may have previously been unable to voice their concerns about their work for a range of reasons. We want to give them that chance as well as to share their successes, " Dr. Strachan said.

The COVID-19 Health Worker Voices WhatsApp channel was developed in conjunction with researchers in the Melbourne eResearch Group within Melbourne School of Engineering's School of Computing and Information Systems and supported by Amazon Web Services. It is completely anonymous, using artificial intelligence to transcribe audio into text and automates text analytics, e.g. sentiment analysis, for researchers to later examine. Importantly the data set is not available to anyone but the researchers and it is fully encrypted on the Cloud.

"By giving health care workers access to an anonymous and encrypted application, we hope that they will feel able to voice the things that matter most to them," Dr. Strachan said.

"Unlike other projects that ask how healthcare workers are faring, our project is unprompted and gives power to health workers to determine

what is important to them and what they feel needs sharing. After all, they are in the best position to judge."

WhatsApp is viewed as widely accessible, enabling the participation of healthcare workers from high, middle and low income countries and well as urban, semi urban and rural settings.

"It was important to make this as accessible and easy to use for healthcare workers as possible. Using a simple interface that allows workers to record voice memos gives us access to authentic and unfiltered responses." Said Head of Nossal Institute's Health Systems and Financing unit Katherine Gilbert.

Stories of challenge and innovation will be captured, as the needs and capacities of health systems evolve during the current crisis.

"It's hoped that the simple voice memos will give us insight into the specific challenges they face, as well as solutions proposed and innovations undertaken, by both health workers and the health systems in which they work," Dr. Strachan said.

"The stories will also convey the range of coping strategies adopted by health workers over time."

Researchers also hope the sharing of stories may also be cathartic for health workers during a pressurized time.

The project is open to all healthcare professionals including GPs, non-GP specialists, nurses, carers and allied health professionals.

The app itself was developed within approximately one month, demonstrating the ability of the Melbourne eResearch Group to quickly and effectively respond to the research software engineering needs of

the University and wider community.

Health workers can share their story by going directly to COVID-19 Health Worker Voices (bit.ly/HWVoices) hosted by WhatsApp on their smartphone and texting "hello" to start.

More information: mspgh.unimelb.edu.au/healthworkervoices

Provided by University of Melbourne

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