Respiratory nurses on COVID-19 front line suffer anxiety and depression

December 10 2020

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A team of researchers, including staff from the University of Southampton, have found that nurses working with respiratory patients on the COVID-19 front line suffered anxiety and depression during the first wave.

The study also found that some nurses working with respiratory patients during the pandemic have been struggling to support their families emotionally and financially.

The research, carried out in partnership with Glasgow Caledonian (GCU) and Edge Hill universities, predicts that poor mental health may increase this winter as increased COVID-19 cases clash with high volumes of winter admissions.

Results of the study, led by GCU health services researcher Dr. Nicola Roberts, showed that just over a fifth of 255 staff surveyed experienced moderate to severe or severe symptoms of anxiety, and around 17 percent had similar levels for depression.

It also found that younger nurses with less experience had higher levels of anxiety and depression and lower resilience levels.

Just over 11 percent of nurses reported that they had difficulty supporting their households emotionally and financially. Many said they felt "overwhelmed" and "exhausted" juggling work and family life.

The study showed evidence of a significant level of anxiety and depression in the nursing workforce and called for action to support the mental health and wellbeing of NHS workers during the pandemic.

Nurses caring for respiratory patients play a crucial role in fighting COVID-19 with their expert skills and knowledge as well as maintaining care for patients with long-term conditions.

Dr. Kate Lippiett, University of Southampton researcher and member of the study team, said, "I am passionate about nurse-led research and education but I feel that nurses voices are often overlooked and that was a driving force behind surveying this particular part of the NHS workforce. NHS workers of all talents have been involved in the COVID response but nurses are the largest workforce. The sense we had as clinical nurses ourselves was that a lot of people were being redeployed into unfamiliar areas and that was promoting quite a lot of anxiety and

the results of the survey back that up—particularly for younger, less experienced nurses."

The survey was carried out in May this year during the first wave of the pandemic and researchers concluded that "whilst the NHS has provided psychological support, these programmes need to be reinforced so that staff are able to cope emotionally and work effectively" during a second surge expected to hit hospitals hard this winter.

Dr. Roberts, Principal Investigator in the study, said: "Nurses are the largest workforce and a crucial component of how we can deliver healthcare well during the pandemic".

"This study has shown a significant level of anxiety and depression in the nursing workforce. This warrants long term nursing workforce adaptations or interventions to support the mental health and wellbeing of NHS workers during the pandemic.

Dr. Roberts continued, "As the pandemic continues it is vital that we support NHS staff to be able to cope and increase resilience. We are looking in more detail at the concerns nurses raised in the survey, how they coped at home and examples of mental health support that was implemented in the workplace."

When asked about how they were managing to cope with work and home life, most of the respondents said they struggled to give emotional support to their families because of exhaustion. One nurse wrote that her "tank feels empty" and another said "it's relentless".

Lindsay Welch, a Lecturer in Adult Nursing at the University of Southampton was also a member of the research team. A former respiratory nurse, she went back to the NHS at the start of the pandemic to provide nurses with training in respiratory conditions. She added, "In

my experience, concerns around redeployment are not always openly addressed and nurses are a workforce that is expected to go where they are needed. It can be extremely daunting for nurses who can specialise in subjects as broad as sexual health and community visits to find themselves suddenly treating patients on a respiratory ward in a pandemic. That is one of the reasons I was keen to go back to the NHS to help by teaching the nurses but we also wanted to capture the concerns of nurses as quickly as we could."

Several nurses reported difficulties buying groceries at the start of the pandemic and felt the financial impact of partners going on furlough or being made redundant.

The research, entitled 'Levels of resilience, anxiety and depression in nurses working in respiratory clinical areas during the COVID pandemic', has been published in the Respiratory Medicine journal.

The researchers have now launched a follow up survey to explore how nurses are managing over the winter period.

This is a body of work including future publications from the first wave; the work can be viewed here.

Provided by University of Southampton

Citation: Respiratory nurses on COVID-19 front line suffer anxiety and depression (2020, December 10) retrieved 25 April 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-12-respiratory-nurses-covid-front-line.html