

Study reveals the COVID toll on Australia's community health workforce

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Australia's community health service workforce was pushed to its limits by the COVID-19 pandemic with new research revealing high levels of stress and burn-out among staff as many consider leaving the sector

altogether.

The [longitudinal study](#) by Deakin University's Institute for Health Transformation (IHT) and the Victorian Healthcare Association found community health service workers experienced considerable psychological distress during the pandemic as they rapidly adapted service delivery to highly vulnerable communities while, at the same time, managing concerns about their own family's health and well-being.

Among surveyed staff, one in five said they were considering leaving the sector after experiencing heavy workloads and burn-out.

IHT senior research fellow, Dr Sara Holton, said the results published in the *Australian Journal of Primary Health* were a wake-up call to the sector that played a crucial but much less visible role than 'front line' clinical [health care](#) workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Community [health services](#) provide government funded [primary care](#) to hundreds of thousands of mostly vulnerable people each year, including GP, dentistry and allied health services such as physiotherapy, drug and alcohol services and [mental health services](#)," Dr Holton said.

"During the pandemic, they continued to provide care for their existing clients as well as playing a central role in the pandemic public health response."

"Community health services ran respiratory clinics and testing sites, cared for COVID-19 patients in the community, and ensured vulnerable and difficult to reach [population groups](#) received information about COVID-19, infection prevention, health care and [support services](#)."

"Most of the public and research focus during the COVID-19 pandemic was on clinical staff in hospitals and other acute health care settings

while the impact on community health service staff has been less understood."

"While staff did identify positive aspects of the pandemic, such as the opportunity to learn new skills and experience great team support, this research exposes for the first time, the impact on their well-being and personal and work lives."

"Many community [health](#) service staff had to change the way they delivered services to their clients. This often made it difficult for them to build rapport as easily or provide the services their clients really needed. They also said that juggling home schooling and working during the pandemic was a struggle."

"A speech pathologist said that wearing masks made it difficult for her to understand her clients who had speech impediments and for her clients to understand her if they usually lip read."

"These findings reveal the need for additional staffing and resources, greater managerial and IT assistance for remote working and additional psychological support to protect their well-being, support them to stay in their roles and continue to provide essential services for their clients."

"Losing these workers from the sector presents a real risk to the often-[vulnerable communities](#) they serve. Without a thriving and adequately resourced workforce many services may need to be reduced," Dr Holton said.

More information: Sara Holton et al, Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Australian community health service staff's occupational and personal lives: a longitudinal study, *Australian Journal of Primary Health* (2023). [DOI: 10.1071/PY22111](https://doi.org/10.1071/PY22111)

Provided by Deakin University

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