

# Being the shield to COVID-19: the front-liners in the fight

## Short communication

Coronaviruses (family-Coronaviridae) infect both animals and humans. Human coronaviruses are known to cause mild to severe disease. It can manifest as fever, cough and shortness of breath to severe diseases like pneumonia, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). Problems arose with a new coronavirus being identified in humans in Wuhan, China in December 2019.<sup>1</sup> According to the situation report 113 of WHO (as of May 12, 2020), over 4 million people have been affected worldwide with more than 283,000 people succumbing to the disease.<sup>2</sup> Needless to say, it is an unprecedented amount of stress.

Health-care professionals are at the forefront in the outbreak response to SARS-Cov2. This new infection has brought up an unfathomable magnitude of challenges to frontline COVID-19 healthcare workers (HCWs) across the globe; fighting a disease, so less understood, being the greatest amongst them all. Being replete with the skill and spirit of service, we stand at a unique position to help save mankind. However, healthcare workers are exposed to numerous hazards including pathogen exposure, physical and psychological distress, fatigue, occupational burnout, stigma and even physical violence in this process.<sup>3</sup>

Shortage of personal protective equipment has been a major concern since the start of the pandemic. This has left health-care workers in an ethical dilemma, weighing their professional obligation with personal risk. Staff shortages due to contracting the infection or quarantine are significant globally. Asymptomatic healthcare workers pose a threat of nosocomial transmission. Thus, we have to work towards increasing testing facilities, to implement a weekly or fortnightly screening of HCWs.<sup>4</sup>

As the patient load increases, the burden of work continues to increase in the setting of a limited workforce. Fellow workers getting infected with COVID-19 contributes to significant psychological stress, subconsciously instilling a hint of fear in their minds. Again, many workers posted in high risk areas have had to self-isolate themselves during and after the course of their duties, for fear of transmitting the infection to their family or dear ones. A mix of public ignorance and fear led to reports of physical assault, mugging or even death threats to the protectors from various parts of the world. All these factors over time, lead to anxiety, depression, insomnia or even post-traumatic stress disorder. Hence, it is imperative to look into the well-being of the front liners. Mental health professionals play a vital role in addressing this situation through provisions of telehealth services, including video discussions, counselling and virtual peer support to prevent burnouts.<sup>5</sup> Workers should be motivated to remain well-connected with their families through online platforms.

It is of importance to boost the immunity of the healthcare workers, through appropriate nutrition. Failing this, we lose out further on the work force. Health-care workers around the world have come outside their individual specialties to help treat COVID-19. From a vascular surgeon in Wuhan, to an endocrinologist in France or a dermatologist in India - there are innumerable stories of volunteers from all

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specialities, stepping into new roles in this pandemic to support their colleagues. In this process, our warriors have had to go through lots of social stigma, ostracism and even eviction by fearful landlords. There is a lot of it that is unknown and that stirs even more uncertainties in the minds of our workers. Bringing to light more transparency in the work system, devising institutional protocols based on government guidelines and proper communication can help clear many doubts and allow for smoother workflow.

## Conclusion and future thoughts

Adequate provision and cautious use of personal protective equipment (PPE) forms the basis of occupational health and safety. With great hope we call on governments and industries to increase PPE manufacturing and availability worldwide. Our safety lies in your hands. Paying heed to the physical and mental well-being of our front-liners is crucial as they are our shields in this fight. Immunity cannot come without Unity. It is a war and we have to win it. It may not seem as discrete as black and white now, but we have to work our way through the grey. Patience and a lot of it, can help us understand the natural history of this disease better. Every minute each day, striving towards restoration of normalcy.

One tiny step at a time, clearing the haze that confronts us. Everyone is ready to contribute in whatever way possible, no matter what their previous roles were. Working in combating COVID-19 emergencies, gives fulfilling memories and enriching experiences when a dying man recovers and reaches home with renewed health and smile. It has allowed us to appreciate the tremendous efforts our colleagues are putting in the fight. The bold shows of appreciation by the community for the dedication, efforts and sacrifices of the health-care workers, has won over hearts. But there is still a lot more that each one of us can do on our parts. Thus, we urge everyone to continue the brave fight, hoping for a day when we can turn Social Distancing into history.

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## Conflicts of interest

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