

COVID-19: Utmost Need to Protect Frontline Health Care Workers in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT:

Health care professionals (HCPs) remain the most vulnerable population while performing their duties they inadvertently put themselves at high risk for any pandemic. During COVID-19 outbreak, scarce supply of personal protective equipment (PPEs) and prolonged exposure of HCPs with large number of COVID-19 positive cases in healthcare settings, long stressful duty hours and insufficient infection prevention and control (IPC) training given to them has led to a large number of infected cases. Policies should be designed and implemented for more screening and better protection with provision of optimal resources to these valuable personnel of health care system.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, Health care professionals, Personal protective equipment, SARS-CoV-2.

How to Cite This:

Ashraf Z, Malik M, Malik MI. COVID-19: Utmost need to protect frontline health care workers in Pakistan. *Biomedica*. 2020; 36 (COVID19-S2): 41-2.

Nosocomial infections especially those related to respiratory diseases are very common and Severe Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2) causing COVID-19 disease is continuing to spread pandemically in every healthcare settings. When millions of folks are observing stay at home policy for minimizing its spread, health care professionals (HCPs) are doing the opposite by attending their hospitals and medical centers and putting themselves at high risk for that pandemic.¹

As of May 13, 2020, this enigmatic contagion respiratory illness has subsequently infected more

than 4.35 million people across the world with 297,000 confirmed deaths so far. The nationwide reckoning of COVID-19 patients in positioned at 35,788 confirmed cases with 13,561 cases in Punjab, 13,341 in Sindh, 5,252 in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, 2,239 cases in Balochistan, 822 in Islamabad, 482 in Gilgit Baltistan and 91 in Azad Jammu and Kashmir.²

On March 22, 2020, Dr Osama Riaz was the first doctor who died of COVID-19 in Gilgit while treating Corona positive patients during his duties. On 5th April, 2020 a long list of 11 doctors was documented Corona positive at Dera Ghazi Khan District of Punjab. So far 766 healthcare workers have been infected by this contagious disease including 440 doctors, 111 nurses and 215 paramedical and supporting staff in Pakistan.²

Prevention of transmission of these nosocomial viral epidemics in healthcare workers is the topmost precedence every day and in this context government of Pakistan has launched 'We Care' campaign for healthcare workers (HCWs) as COVID-19 knockout 32,937 healthcare workers worldwide.

According to infection prevention and control forums, many motives lie behind the heavy

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infectivity of HCWs by COVID-19. These include scarce supply of personal protective equipment (PPEs) and prolonged exposure of HCPs with large number of COVID-19 positive cases in healthcare settings. Similarly, long stressful duty hours and continuous exposure to infectious patients make them prone to be diseased by this contagion. One main neglected factor is insufficient infection prevention and control (IPC) training given to these HCWs, wanting of training leads to spread of this respiratory – borne disease among them.³ Along with droplet infection, contact transmission is also foremost route of SARS-CoV-2 transmission among HCWs. Hand hygiene is reflecting a very important role in prevention of this transmission among HCPs who along with their own personal safety are also worried about their families to be affected by them.⁴

Worldwide the healthcare systems are working beyond their capacity for last more than three months in this global pandemic. Though these systems can be developed within days or months, but the health care specialties or workers cannot be produced or manufactured within this time lapse. It's the duty of government that these workers are not treated as hostages but human entities. Enough supply of PPEs, proper duty rosters, postponing of non-necessary events and psychological backing should be the government priorities for health care workers.

Meanwhile, when number of cases of COVID-19 is increasing day by day in hospital vicinity, healthcare professionals are more exposed to the transmission of this infection. According to World health organization (WHO) more and more testing for this disease should be the agenda of healthcare stake holders for hospital-based surveillance.⁵ Subsequently more HCWs will be screened for this contagious disease and valuable resources of health care system can be conserved.

On 9th May, 2020, WHO documented that Pakistan is reaching its testing capacity over 16,000 tests per day for COVID-19. Currently, 58

laboratories are working for COVID-19 testing and among these, Punjab has majority with 23 laboratories and they are performing approximately 6000 tests per day. Soon these laboratories will also be functional in remote areas of Punjab like DG Khan and Muzaffargarh. These laboratories will be helpful for surveillance of this communicable disease and will play a vital role in inhibition of COVID-19 in healthcare workers as well as in general public.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None to declare.

FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE

None to disclose.

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Author's Contribution

ZA: Drafting of manuscript and literature search and critical review.

MM: Conception and design of study, drafting and final approval of manuscript.

MIM: Intellectual input in revision of manuscript.

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