

Psychological symptoms among healthcare workers handling COVID-19 patients

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Healthcare workers serve as the frontliners against the coronavirus 2019 disease (COVID-19) and this puts them most at risk of infection as they attend to numerous patients with unknown status. This study aimed to examine stress, anxiety, and depression among healthcare workers caring for COVID-19 patients in Sarawak General Hospital (SGH), Malaysia.

Materials and Methods: This cross-sectional observational study conducted in SGH during the pandemic with an online self-administered questionnaire composed of two parts, the socio-demographic characteristics, and the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS).

Results: A total of 105 healthcare workers responded to this study. A questionnaire in both Bahasa Melayu and English was used. The findings showed that all healthcare workers had mild anxiety, with the majority experiencing mild stress (57.1%), and almost half of the respondents experiencing mild depression (41%). Female subjects had a significant higher mean score in anxiety level and stress level compared to male subjects (10.0±3.20 vs. 8.6±2.93, $p<0.05$; 14.1±4.76 vs. 10.7±3.70, $p<0.05$, respectively). Staff who were transferred from other units to handle COVID-19 cases experienced more psychological symptoms. There were significant correlations between the depression, anxiety and stress levels among the healthcare workers and the number of children they had ($r=0.739$, $p=0.001$; $r=0.642$, $p=0.001$; $r=1$, $p=0.001$ respectively). However, the stress level among the healthcare workers was reversely correlated with their years of working experience ($r=-0.199$, $p=0.042$).

Conclusion: This study identified some socio-demographic factors associated with increased levels of stress, anxiety and depression among the healthcare workers during pandemic, which may lay ground for future interventions.

KEYWORDS:

Stress level, psychological symptoms, healthcare workers, COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome

coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), which has been declared as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11th March 2020.¹ The WHO (2020) reported that no treatment has currently been shown to prevent or cure the disease, but there are coordinated efforts to develop vaccines and medicines for the prevention and treatment.² Many people have been directly or indirectly affected by the pandemic caused by the virus, and to the WHO it spreads through close contact via small droplets produced by coughing or sneezing, as well as by touching contaminated surfaces, according.² Doctors, nurses, and medical assistants play an important role as the frontliners in the fight against COVID-19, but they are also the most at risk of infection as they attend to numerous patients with unknown status. Bandyopadhyay et al. identified that a total of 152,888 infections and 1,413 deaths due to COVID-19 have been reported among healthcare workers in affected countries; 71.6% of those infected were women and 38.6% were nurses, while 70.8% of those who died were men, and 51.4% were doctors.³ The total number of infections and deaths reported in healthcare workers was 3.9% and 0.5% of the total number of 3,912,156 patients with COVID-19 worldwide and 270, 426 COVID-19 deaths worldwide respectively.³

The mental status of healthcare workers, who may experience anxiety, depression, acute stress disorders, burnout, and post-traumatic stress disorders, should be of great concern to us all. Previous studies conducted during earlier world pandemic incidents reported that the prevalence of anxiety, depression, and stress commonly occur among healthcare workers during and after outbreaks. Further, these psychological symptoms can lead to long-lasting effects, and cause delayed urgent response, as well as jeopardised attention and decision-making during the current pandemic.⁴ Based on previous studies, factors that contribute to stress in healthcare workers are their welfare of family members, closures of schools and daycares, and access to appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE).⁵ Work experience plays an important role in helping healthcare workers deal with a pandemic. A study conducted in Canada during the outbreak of SARS reported that healthcare workers with fewer years of clinical experience are prone to experience prolonged psychological distress.⁶

Immense pressure and long working hours can be one of the causes of stress among healthcare workers, and this can

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