

1 Psychological distress among healthcare professionals at the frontlines

Anaesthesiologists' perspective

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1.1 Introduction

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, worldwide data indicated healthcare practitioners have a high incidence and prevalence of suffering from depression, burnout and anxiety, with multiple adverse consequences, such that it can be considered a “parallel pandemic” among healthcare workers. Burnout syndrome (BOS) is defined by the World Health Organization International Classification of Disease 11 (ICD 11) as a syndrome resulting from poorly managed chronic workplace stress (World Health Organization, 2019), while depression is defined as the presence of depressed mood or loss of interest in almost all activities in the ICD 11 (World Health Organization, 2020).

The prevalence of burnout and depression among healthcare practitioners in Malaysia has never been studied during a pandemic prior to this study. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, this question has again been pushed into the forefront, due to concerns with maintaining the physical and mental wellbeing of clinicians handling this pandemic. At the same time, there is also no data on the factors associated with psychological distress among Malaysian medical workers, which is not desirable when planning for preventative strategies in alleviating their psychological distress. To answer these questions, we set forth to capture a snapshot of the situation in Malaysia with regards to burnout and depression among frontline anaesthesiology clinicians working in Sungai Buloh Hospital, the national infectious disease centre of Malaysia and the hospital gazetted to be an exclusive COVID-19 hospital in Malaysia.

With this study, more insight will be obtained into the psychological challenge that is faced by healthcare workers during pandemics by putting the spotlight on the prevalence of burnout and depression. Also, by investigating the factors associated with burnout and depression, specific preventative strategies can be designed to improve the working conditions of Malaysian healthcare workers. Part of the data from our survey has been published as a correspondence article in the journal *Anaesthesia* (Tsan et al., 2020).

1.2 Literature review

The field of anaesthesiology and critical care has been specifically selected to be the target of the survey. This is due to the nature of work of anaesthesiologists in Malaysia, who handle the sickest patients in the intensive care unit (ICU) of the hospital. With regards to the pandemic, anaesthesiologists would be managing COVID-19 patients requiring airway