

Review Article

Health care workers facing Social Ostracism during COVID-19

Kaushik Bhattacharya¹, Neela Bhattacharya²

Ever since the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared on March 11th 2020, Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) a 'pandemic' due to alarming level of spread of the Corona virus infection, doctors and the health care workers are facing discrimination and are socially ostracised. Stigma associated with COVID-19 poses a serious threat to the physical and mental wellbeing of health care workers. This article while highlighting the problems also suggests measures the doctors and health care workers should take so that they can address this stigma efficiently.

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Key words : COVID-19, pandemic, assault, stigma.

'I am not afraid of death, but I am afraid of dying. Pain can be alleviated by morphine, but the pain of social ostracism cannot be taken away'

— **Derek Jarman**

Ever since the COVID-19 was declared as pandemic by WHO, the doctors and other health care workers are being shunned and harassed by the society. Apart from the landlords asking the doctors treating the COVID -19 patients in the hospital to vacate the rented house immediately, there has been reports from across the globe of shocking incidences of physical assault on health care workers. Social ostracism has become malignant during the pandemic causing a lot of anxiety to all the health care workers.

Social Ostracism in India :

Though Government of India has warned that strict action under the Epidemic Act would be taken against those indulging in social ostracism of health care workers, the incidences are not showing any decreasing trend. The moment the doctor or a nurse is taken to the hospital when they have fever or feel sick from home in a hospital ambulance, the paranoid residents of the entire apartment complex whip out their mobile cameras to shoot a video of the sick person and it appears in the social media immediately as if a criminal is being taken to the jail. On one side a health care professional fears the risk of contracting the virus even after wearing the tiresome and irritating Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) without drinking

Editor's Comment :

- Corona Virus Disease with all its Pandemic behaviour is here to stay.
- Doctors and health care workers while dealing with the disease must invariably face the backlash that comes from fear and misinformation regarding the disease from the public.
- It is by having a clear understanding of the disease, taking safety precautions, and guiding the public with facts and precise knowledge will the medical personnel be able to ride over these testing times.

water or taking a washroom break for 8 to 12 hours on duty, there is tremendous anxiety of they and their entire family being socially boycotted by all if they fall sick due to the virus any time¹. There is not only an anxiety of separation from the family members but also being isolated from the society if declared as COVID positive. A nurse of a hospital had to stop sending his daughter to tuition class after some students asked her odd questions and harassed the child. More than 150 house surgeons at MGM Hospital who have passed MBBS from Kakatiya Medical College in Warangal had been asked to vacate the accommodation. A house surgeon from MGM Hospital, Warangal put up a post on Facebook which went viral " One owner said that we are dirty. Did I study 11 hours a day for this ?". In Telangana, duty doctors and nurses faced harassment from the police and their vehicles were vandalized too. It is unfortunate to see that these healthcare professionals who are hailed as 'Coronavirus Warriors' once have been so blacklisted by the community. All the medical staff put their lives at risk, take the due precautions and yet face such discrimination. Residents of a locality in Indore pelted stones at the health care workers who had gone there to screen the people for COVID-19, injuring two female doctors. Doctors also face a lot of flak and abuses from the

¹MS, DNB, MNAMS, FAIS, FACS, FRCS (Glasgow), Specialist Surgery, CAPFs Composite Hospital BSF Kadamtala, Siliguri 734011 and Corresponding Author

²MS, DNB, MNAMS, MCh (Plastic Surgery), Consultant Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeon, Anandaloke Multispeciality Hospital, Siliguri 734001

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patient attenders due to shortage of essential equipment, ventilators or PPE and the hospital policy of restricting visiting by patient family. The anxiety of the doctors is either due to worry of self and the family, shortage of equipment and social stigma. In Pune's Wagholi, 22 members of staff of a multi-specialty hospital – including doctors, nurses, medical staff, residential medical officer, and male nurses, were forced to vacate their accommodations as they had come in contact with a COVID-19 positive patient. A country where a lot of Indians stepped onto their balconies to beat plates, ring bells, and clap their hands to thank the doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals for their tireless efforts, at the call of the Prime Minister of India once, has ultimately degenerated into making many of their health care workers 'homeless' as a mark of gratitude! A neurologist from Chennai who died due to COVID 19 was denied dignified burial as a mob vandalised the ambulance where the body was kept, injured staff, and objected to burying the body in the crematorium just a couple of months ago.

Social Ostracism in the rest of the world :

A senior nurse from Mexico City went on national television to make a plea on behalf of her fellow health care workers- "Please stop assaulting us" during this pandemic. In the Philippines, attackers doused a nurse with bleach causing blindness. Nurses in the State of Jalisco were blocked from public transportation because of her occupation. A nurse in Culiacan in Mexico was drenched with Chlorine while walking along the street. In Merida, a city of the Yucatan Peninsula, a nurse was hit by an egg thrown by someone passing on a motorcycle. Since the coronavirus pandemic, many doctors and nurses in Columbia have been facing stigmatization as they are regarded as COVID-19 spreaders. One Italian nurse tragically took her own life – an act that colleagues attributed to the stresses of her work caring for COVID-19 patients. Healthcare workers in China, Thailand, Turkey and Pakistan have faced intimidation or arrest for casting doubt on Government policies or for suggesting patient data has been manipulated. A nurse at Japan was approached by a few mothers and asked to leave a Tokyo park she was visiting with her children.

What is the way out for the health care workers ?

Doctors and other health workers have not only taken a hit on their physical health, but even their mental health has been affected very badly. A study has quoted that chronic stress of this type could shorten the life span of a person by 2.8 years².

Like the spread of the virus, COVID-19-related violence has proliferated around the globe unchecked. It is time for the medical profession to deal with the stigma with a firm hand. Its better to take a break from the news as hearing about the pandemic daily with reports of deaths of doctors and health care workers can be quite depressing. It is important to have a constructive routine daily that one enjoys like floor workouts or Yoga. It is especially important to communicate with the fellow doctors or health professionals daily to lessen the mental tension. It is important for all to keep at the back of the mind that one day this phase will end. If someone is feeling depressed or anxious due to stigma from the society, its always better to seek help from all quarters. Education is one of the most popular tools to deconstruct stigma. In this regard, social media posts from celebrities who have had the disease is also likely to help lift the taboo.

A constructive way for doctors to engage currently is to take the suggestions given in the UNICEF guide to prevent and address social stigma³:

(1) *Words matter* : It is especially important how doctors and health care workers speak and behave. Our words should be reassuring and positive, our behaviour should be calm and composed, should suggest empathy despite the tensions we bear.

(2) *Do your part* : Doctors and health care staff are in a great position to reach out through the social, print or television media and spread facts and dispel rumours. They can advise regarding healthy measures and safe practices regularly, build a clear image that a doctor is your best friend in these times, engage social influences like prominent citizens to spread knowledge. They should publish success stories of people recovering from COVID and the treatment given by selfless health care workers, implement a "Hero" campaign so that the public would think twice before stigmatizing doctors.

(3) *Team up* with health authorities to devise ways in which the pandemic and the issues arising out of it can be efficiently resolved in your locality to garner the trust of the local people. Systematic training and counselling of the health care workers is also especially important⁴.

Conclusion :

"The world needs someone they can admire from a distance, from a very far distance "

— Michael Bassey Johnson

Stigma due to COVID-19 is an important factor for burnout and compassion fatigue among health care workers. They are not only facing psychological

distress but also affecting the job performance. Its time for the society to come forward and help the medical community with confidence building measures and not discriminate them. The doctors and the health care workers should have a control over their tongue and should be compassionate to the patients, irrespective of knowing the risk of getting ostracised in the society. The story of Corona survivors should be highlighted in the media to create a positivity.

Limitation of Study :

Since this is an article on social implications of COVID on health care personnel, there is as such no limitation involved.

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