

## Perspective

### Need of the hour : Health Worker safety

Rudrajit Paul, Jyotirmoy Pal

17<sup>th</sup> September was **World Patient Safety Day**. During this current pandemic, the WHO celebrated this day with the theme “*Health worker safety: A priority of Patient safety*”. This was a much needed focus on the dire working condition of doctors and nurses in most parts of the world, including India. While there are numerous legal safeguards and pressure groups for patients’ rights in India, there are almost no organized groups for doctor or other health workers’ safety. Thus, a doctor, if in any jeopardy, is likely to find himself/herself completely alone in the face of adversity.

On September 16, 2020, Shaw et al published an excellent article in *The Lancet* journal discussing some very pertinent topics on this issue. According to them, the current pandemic has exposed the precarious working conditions of healthcare workers all over the world. Health workers like doctors are already working in a high-risk environment, where they run the risk of physical and mental harm. This pandemic has exposed that raw underbelly in a glaring manner. The authors argue that unless health worker safety is ensured, patient safety can’t be obtained. Many countries have failed to provide health workers with adequate protection during their Covid duties and this has exposed these hapless workers to undue danger. Thousands of doctors all over the world have died from the infection contracted during patient care. The authors also argue that these incidents are just the tip of the iceberg. Health workers, especially doctors, are daily exposed to physical and mental health challenges. There is the risk of burnout, lack of workplace safety and the palpable danger of violence. Thus, the authors have called for the recognition that patient safety is only possible when there is health worker safety. Unless health workers can be assured a safe and nurturing work environment, good health care will remain elusive.

The following table gives the approximate number of health workers dying from Covid-19 in different countries till the third week of September, 2020.

India is the country with the highest death toll among physicians. Such death devastates the family and the

Country	Doctors dying from COVID-19	Total Health workers mortality
USA	Around 100	695
Italy	Around 150	More than 200
India	At least 382 (IMA data)	Not known
UK	At least 30	540
Spain	5	63
China	21	23

colleagues and demoralizes the entire workforce. In countries like India with no social security network, such death also means economic devastation for the family, as some recent data have shown.

While death at the frontline is one of the jeopardies of the profession, doctors in India are daily exposed to a lot of other hardships like medico-legal problems, economic hardship, lack of employment and the ever-present risk of physical violence. All of these insecurities destroy the morale of the workforce and naturally lead to inferior quality patient care. In many places, aged doctors are working in Covid wards despite having co-morbidities, thereby exposing them to high level of biohazard.

In India, the general practitioners have to work in small chambers with almost no mechanism of biohazard protection. Due to the unorganized structure of medical practice in India, such GPs (who are at the lowest rung of power) are in no position to negotiate for a safer working environment from the businessmen (Owners of health facilities). These doctors are thus, at high risk of contracting the infection and in fact, among the dead doctors in India, the largest proportion is GPs and that too, mostly those over 60.

Thus, at this juncture, the policy makers and common people have to realize that safety at the workplace in terms of physical, mental and economic wellbeing is a **fundamental right** of the health workers of this country. Unless this is implemented, a good health system can never be possible.

*Further reading :*

Shaw A et al. No patient safety without Health Worker safety. *The Lancet* 2020; [Online first]