



VIOLENCE AND DISCRIMINATION AGAINST HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS IN INDIA DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Community Medicine

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ABSTRACT

Doctors and other health care professionals in India have been increasingly targeted for physical, verbal abuse, sexist remarks, stigma and discrimination during their duty and at home in the pandemic of Covid-19. Incidents have been reported regarding stone pelting of health staff, eviction of doctors from their residences by co-residents of the building and considering doctors as dirty and from fear of getting infection. Instances of health care staff affected by SARS-CoV-2 virus have been reported due to lack of personal protective equipments. The study reports the plight of the healthcare professionals in dealing with Covid-19 pandemic. Preventive measures suggested include strict law implementation, provision of police in health care settings, public awareness campaigns on Covid-19 and behavior change of the public towards health care professionals.

KEYWORDS

Violence, Stigma, Discrimination, Health Care Professionals

INTRODUCTION

Doctors and other health care professionals are facing a double-edged weapon during the COVID 19 pandemic. Lack of health care professionals force them to work hard for several hours a day ranging from 14-16 hours at a stretch in the designated COVID hospitals. Besides, they also bear the brunt of receiving verbal, physical abuses, and female doctors getting sexist remarks from the admitted patients in the health care facilities.

Instances of violence and discrimination against health care professionals

Incidents of violence against these corona warriors have been escalating over time both in the hospitals and community setting. One such incident has been reported from Indore, in Madhya Pradesh state wherein two female doctors who had gone to a densely populated area in Indore to check a woman suspected of having COVID-19 were chased, pelted stones by the residents of the area. In the words of one of the affected doctor "we were working to keep people safe. We had information about a person coming in contact with a COVID-19 patient. We were talking to the person when residents got agitated and attacked us" (Pandey, 2020).

Incidents of unruly scenes have been reported from other parts of the country. One such incident happened in a hospital in Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh wherein at least 21 persons who attended a religious event in Delhi and having links to several novel corona virus positive cases in India were quarantined. Some of them were roaming naked, harassing women doctors, nurses by using vulgar and abusive language (Pandey, 2020).

Similarly, tension ensued when a male patient made sexist remarks to a female doctor in Lok Nayak Hospital, New Delhi. When other colleagues of the doctor objected, the patient allegedly called other patients and they threatened the doctors who hid in their duty room. Security staff did not respond immediately due to lack of personal protective equipments (PPE) but later controlled the unruly patients after getting PPE from the doctors who removed their PPE and gave them (Dutt, 2020). Such violence can go beyond one's imagination. The horrific incident that happened in Moradabad, Uttar Pradesh reminds about the extreme situation where doctors and health care staff had to face. The team along with police personnel had been pelted with stones, their ambulance and official cars were damaged injuring the doctor and other members of the team. The team had gone to take four men in quarantine facility from the family having Covid-19 patient who died few days back. The affected doctor nearly survived from death due to timely arrival of police force and hospitalization (Times now, 2020).

Besides violence, health care staff are also confronted with stigma and

discrimination both at workplace and home. One doctor expressed her disheartening feeling when came to know that her neighbours thought that their family shouldn't be allowed to stay in the building. (Pandey, 2020). Such threat of being shunned by others for fear of being infected including eviction threat from their own apartments and general criticism comes at a time the health care professionals are fighting tooth and nail against novel corona virus, often maintaining social distance from their family or quarantine measures. In the words of one junior resident doctor at Hyderabad's MGM Hospital "One (house)-owner even said we were dirty. They asked us to vacate without notice. Most of the doctors are now on the streets and have nowhere to go." Such is the plight of doctors who have to face the workload of treating Covid-19 patients, risking themselves to the infection and without having any place to stay. Doctors also had to face the hardship of assaults even while going for duty. One such incident happened in Khammam district of Telangana where a resident doctor was allegedly assaulted by the police at the check post who stopped stepping out amid the lockdown in India (Sharma, 2020).

The risk of health care professionals getting the novel Corona virus infection has increased due to lack of PPE and close contact with the infected patients. Several doctors in different parts of India have been reported to be positive for SARS-CoV-2. For instance, one junior resident doctor in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, one doctor at a private hospital in Rajasthan, one in Kerala reported to be positive for Covid-19 (Sharma, 2020).

Factors for violence against health care staff

Factors leading to violence against the health care professionals seems to stem from peoples' lack of awareness about the novel corona virus, unperceived threats of fatal death from the infection, lack of faith in the lockdown measures which have led the lay people stay aloof from their family members, disrespect for the law of the country, religious beliefs that God can only save them from the infection and the need for community prayers for the same, unwarranted rumours which have circulated in the social media regarding targeting of specific community and spreading virus through injections by the health care professionals, conspiracy theory, misinformation about home remedies and cures, etc. (Purohit, 2020).

Preventive measures against violence and discrimination of health care professionals

Hon'ble Prime Minister, Government of India has informed the public about paying due respect and maintain dignity of doctors, health care professionals and other corona frontline workers such as the police, municipal workers and expressed that those found of harassment would be penalized as per law. In addition, it is necessary to create awareness among the public regarding the nature of the Covid-19 disease, its transmission, focus on hand washing, cough hygiene,

social distancing and good behavior towards health care staff. There is a need to identify rumour mongers in the society through use of technology in identifying the source and implement strict punitive measures. In cases of hospitals where Covid-19 cases are treated, there should be provision for strict policing in addition to presence of adequate security staff with availability of PPE so that they are protected in dealing with the unruly behavior of patients. Those violent and offensive patients should be punished strictly as per the existing laws in India.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest in the article.

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