

Chapter 1

Lived Experiences of Healthcare Professionals During the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency: A Qualitative Exploration

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ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study used an interpretative phenomenological analysis to explore the lived experiences of healthcare professionals (HCPs). Twenty in-depth interviews were conducted with nine physicians and 11 paramedical staff. The analysis is summarized into five superordinate themes: initial reaction, perceived challenges, existential distress, the building of support mechanisms, and growth in adversity. While the first three themes broadly reflect the difficulties encountered by HCPs while serving COVID-19 patients, the last two themes demonstrate the scope of finding meaning in work and personal growth during this unprecedented public health emergency. This study also highlights the heavy toll of the physical and psychological burdens on HCPs due to the COVID-19 health crisis. The insights gained from this study can be utilized in designing an effective intervention program to promote resilience and well-being among HCPs.

INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) announced the COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic on March 11, 2020, and made an emphatic call to all the countries to take necessary actions to combat and control

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the pandemic outbreak. India accounts for a significantly larger population density of about 1.3 billion people than other countries globally. The demographic complexity of India already has the issues of clean drinking water, poor sanitation, densely populated living conditions, access to healthcare, etc. These issues have posed a significant threat to India's mission to control Coronavirus transmission and offer effective treatment (Pal & Yadav, 2020).

The crisis of COVID-19 has reaffirmed the significance of an efficient healthcare system to bridge the gap between demand and supply. India has a mixed healthcare model consisting of government and private healthcare systems (Chokshi *et al.*, 2016). According to a report published in the *Economic Times* (Goel, 2019), WHO recommended a 1:1000 doctor-population ratio to manage health necessities effectively in any country. However, India had a 1:1445 doctor population ratio in 2019. According to Kumar and Pal (2018), India would achieve the WHO's prescribed doctor-population ratio by 2024-25 only with the intervention of government policies. In the light of these facts, it can be argued that healthcare professionals (HCPs) are facing an enormous amount of workload to manage the uncertainties resulting from the pandemic of COVID-19. The burden of the pandemic has also led to a variety of psychological issues on HCPs (Hummel *et al.*, 2021). The health and well-being of HCPs are essential as they provide sustainable health care services to the patient population.

The study investigates the lived experiences of HCPs involved in treating COVID-19 patients using an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA). There is a dearth of in-depth studies in the Indian context examining the lived experiences of HCPs and understanding their psychological and occupational challenges in mitigating the demand. The study may contribute to the extant literature by identifying critical factors that are imperative for the mental health and efficiency of HCPs. The study also discusses significant recommendations to promote resilience and well-being.

BACKGROUND

HCPs are essential for any healthcare system. During the times of health emergencies, apart from treating the patients, it is also expected that HCPs will be involved in public health education, epidemiological surveillance, quarantine management, fever clinics, staging facility operation, and more' (Seale *et al.*, 2009, p. 2). However, they are also the people who remain on the frontline, making themselves vulnerable to get infected (Ives *et al.*, 2009).

The Coronavirus outbreak in the world has left the healthcare system overwhelmed. The unexpected surge of heightened workload for HCPs has posed many questions ranging from managing occupational workload to maintaining mental health amid the crisis. According to Pollock *et al.* (2020), HCPs are at a greater risk for developing mental health and well-being related issues that include:

...concern about exposure to the virus; personal and family needs and responsibilities; managing a different workload; lack of access to necessary tools and equipment (including personal protection equipment, PPE); feelings of guilt relating to the lack of contribution; uncertainty about the future of the workplace or employment; learning new technical skills; and adapting to a different workplace or schedule (p.8).

HCPs play a key role in managing the hardships and challenges associated with COVID-19 despite a significant mismatch between the doctor-patient ratio in India (Ghosh, 2021). Studies have reported that HCPs are at a higher risk of mental health problems during the current pandemic (Gupta *et al.*,

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