South African health professionals’ state of wellbeing during the emergence of COVID-19

To the Editor: Given the rapid emergence of COVID-19 in South Africa (SA), little is known about the wellbeing of our health professionals. The mortality rate from COVID-19 among our health workforce was 0.9% as at 13 August 2020, with most infections among nurses (52%; n=27 360).1 In this letter we present selected findings from an online survey conducted from 11 April 2020 to 7 May 2020, entitled ‘Front line talk’. It describes the experiences of healthcare professionals as the epidemic unfolded in SA. The study methodology has been reported elsewhere through the Human Sciences Research Council web portal.2 Here we summarise key findings on the general health, wellbeing and psychological distress of our health workforce.

In total, 7 607 healthcare professionals participated. General health and wellbeing were measured using three levels, namely low, moderate and high. The majority (78.2%) were female (95% confidence interval (CI) 77.0 - 79.4) and aged 18 - 49 years (72.3%, 95% CI 70.7 - 73.9). Nurse practitioners comprised 36.7% of the sample (95% CI 35.0 - 38.4), other healthcare professionals 34.7% (95% CI 33.1 - 36.3) and medical practitioners 28.7% (95% CI 27.2 - 30.2). Psychological distress was measured using the Kessler psychological distress scale.3

Overall, about one-quarter reported poor general health and wellbeing (23.7%, 95% CI 22.0 - 25.5). There was a significant difference in the levels of general health and wellbeing among the professional categories (p<0.001). Nurses fared the worst with regard to health, wellbeing and psychological distress.

Nurses’ general health and wellbeing were poorest (44.4%, 95% CI 40.5 - 48.4) compared with medical practitioners (31.1%, 95% CI 27.7 - 34.7) and other healthcare professionals (24.5%, 95% CI 21.46 - 27.83). Moreover, a total of 19.4% (95% CI 17.8 - 21.1) were severely psychologically distressed, whilst just over half reported low distress levels (53.6%, 95% CI 51.6 - 55.7). Psychological distress was significantly higher among nurses than other health professionals (p<0.001) (Fig. 1). Furthermore, 23.9% (95% CI 21.3 - 26.6) of public sector employees were severely distressed compared with 15.3% (95% CI 13.3 - 17.5) of those working in the private sector. Among females, >20% (95% CI 19.7 - 23.8) were severely distressed. High psychological distress levels were associated with low levels of general health and wellbeing among participants (70.8%, 95% CI 66.3 - 75.0).

These generalisable survey findings suggest that indicators of distress were already heightened among health professionals at the start of the epidemic in SA. Our findings for SA are consistent with two other surveys among health professionals, set in New York, USA4,5 (N=657), and China, including Wuhan, Hubei and outer regions6 (N=1 257), which highlighted that highest distress levels were found among nurses. Additionally, females carried a higher burden of distress compared with males. Shanafelt et al.4 summarised five needs expressed by healthcare professionals during the pandemic as follows: ‘Hear me, protect me, prepare me, support me, and care for me.’ There is a need for psychological support for our healthcare professionals in dealing with the pandemic on multiple levels, with nurses being particularly vulnerable. These interventions need to be carefully tailored if they are to be effective.

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