

Letter to the Editor

Saving Our Healthcare Workers Again During the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Philippines

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Dear Editor,

In a recent article published in this journal, the authors investigated the prevalence of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in healthcare workers (HCWs) designated to treat coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). They concluded that non-medical personnel tended to have higher odds than medical personnel of being categorized as having PTSD, and those with prior Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus experience were more susceptible than those without such experience. These findings suggest the need for timely interventions to manage human resources for a sustainable quarantine system [1]. Another related article concluded that HCWs have a higher risk for infection than the general community, using either self-reported data on COVID-19 testing positivity or a symptom-based predictor of positive infection status [2]. These articles reiterated the risk that is confronted by our HCWs every time they attend to their duties. In the Philippines, HCWs are considered as one of the greatest weapons against COVID-19 but unfortunately, they are in a continuous state of struggle and are facing a “red alert.” There are nine factors associated with the work performance and mental health of HCWs: depression, anxiety, having inadequate support, experiencing occupational stress, decreased productivity, lack of workplace pre-

paredness, financial concerns associated with changes in income and daily living, fear of transmission, and burnout/fatigue [3]. All these factors are the same concerns of HCWs in the Philippines. With some authors who have called for the need to prioritize HCWs in terms of physical, mental, and financial support from the government [4], and adding the spiritual aspect to be holistic [5], I share the viewpoint that this support is very much needed without reservation. However, much work needs to be done.

The country’s HCWs need substantial care and appreciation due to their extensive sacrifices. Some HCWs have reported that they have been harassed, evicted from homes, refused rides on buses, and kicked out of restaurants as their fellow citizens worry about coming into contact with them, thus tagging them as “virus spreaders.” Aside from the risks of being infected with the virus from patients, they are not well compensated in terms of salary. Just recently, nurses and other HCWs have warned that they may conduct a “mass resignation” due to the inability of the Department of Health to give their special risk allowance and active hazard duty pay.

With this, I propose a concrete program that will be long-lasting and not just address the problem momentarily. I call it “For Heroes’ Welfare” since they are indeed heroes in our sight. The program is characterized by a consistent and collaborative effort by the major institutions of the country by improving their working conditions and investing more in our health workforce. These institutions include the government, schools, and the Church. They must work hand in hand to promote HCWs’ welfare and support their needs. The government must be sensitive enough not to delay their salary as well as the minimal allowances that they expect. There must be an adequate

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supply of personal protective equipment and other essential needs and resources for HCWs to carry out their duties. Public appreciation of their dedication to their work must also be expressed through social media to motivate them. The creation of short videos and campaign ads about HCWs' inspiring stories can be an example of this moral support. These virtual materials can also be shown not only on social media platforms, but also on national television and aired on various radio stations. Schools, meanwhile, must highlight in the curriculum of all levels a mandatory discussion about the importance of our HCWs in battling the pandemic and their contribution to public health in general. Even in online classes, teachers can require their students to come up with creative projects such as virtual posters, leaflets, slogans, and other informative materials regarding paying tribute to HCWs. These outputs can then be posted on the schools' official websites and social media accounts for public information. Lastly, the Church, regardless of which religious affiliation is involved, can of course utilize the pulpit by means of the priests'/pastors' homilies or preaching about the HCWs' charitable service to the community. They can even offer regular prayer intentions for them, focusing on their safety and security, during liturgical celebrations.

Healthcare capacity remains a serious concern as of this writing since the number of COVID-19 cases continues to increase due to the more infectious Delta coronavirus variant. If these HCWs lose their patience and run out of hope because of the lack of support from our institutions, then it will be difficult to win this battle against the pandemic. Caring for our HCWs is everybody's task and it is important for health systems and healthcare organizations to create and ensure programs that will cater to the needs of these unsung heroes.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author has no conflicts of interest associated with the material presented in this paper.

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