

SAFETY OF HEALTHCARE WORKERS IN INDIA

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Abstract

Health is one of our fundamental human rights and the role of workers in the healthcare system is inseparable. Health workers being the front line staff have more complicated situations to deal with especially in the wake of a pandemic like COVID-19. WHO cautions that they are exposed to hazards that put them at risk of infection. Nevertheless, we are witnessing the relentless efforts put forth by health workers to reinstall the health care system in their respective countries. Amidst all this tension, another concern that derails the COVID-19 battle is the attacks happening against COVID-19 warriors around different parts of the country. This paper is a subjective personal introspection of the authors on the safety of health workers in India. The main objective of the study is to find out the different problems of safety faced by healthcare workers in India and measures to control them.

Keywords: Health, COVID-19, Safety, Healthcare Worker, Measures

1. Introduction

1.1 COVID -19: The Indian Scenario:

COVID – 19 being a real threat now, it is one of the most realistic and dangerous element at the moment for human existence. As of now more than 4,753,445 people have been infected with around 313,882 fatalities (worldometers.info, May 17,2020). Coronavirus has been declared as a global pandemic resulting in a stand-still to all our normal lives. In India, we have recorded 90927 cases with 2872 deaths (mygov.in/covid-19, May 17,2020). This is a factor affecting our world economy as well and the effects are here to last a lifetime. Considering the contagious nature of this pandemic, we are not able to predict the time that will be taken to bring this under control. We still do not have a vaccine though most probably we might end up with one by the end of the year. This is where our healthcare workers become crucial in this battle.

The doctors, nurses, hospital staff and other people like sweepers and cleaners have a big role to play to make sure that everything is under control. WHO warns that the long working hours of doctors and nurses can lead to occupational burn out, psychological distress, fatigue and physical and psychological violence. Hence the organization has given clear guidance on the rights and responsibilities of health workers with key considerations for occupational health and safety. It is imperative that they are given maximum assistance to do their duties most effectively ensuring maximum safety to all our lives.

2. Research Inputs (Qualitative)

2.1 Issues faced by Health workers in India

This is a major issue which is causing huge concern in India and worldwide. Nurses were attacked in different parts of the world like Mexico City, Philippines and Pakistan. (Kirk Semple, April 2020, NY times). Doctors and nurses are even facing social stigma along with the fear of attack/social isolation due to in case they contract Covid-19. Ignorant public believe that our healthcare workers can become carriers due to the nature of their jobs. However, they forget that doctors and nurses save so many lives which are endorsed by all parties concerned including the government. A new problem which has come into limelight is the amount of atrocities and attacks against these healthcare workers in different parts of the country. ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) workers (India) were attacked in different parts by miscreants who are apprehensive about being tested and quarantined. The attacks were also reported against doctors, nurses including the attack on certain ambulances. These cases have made the system wary and now new laws have been established to counter these miscreants.

Another area of concern when it comes to the safety of health workers is the humiliation which they receive by the health fraternity from their

neighbours. There are many instances shared by the health workers where they have been ill-treated or manhandled by their locality people and neighbours. This has in turn traumatized the whole family of the health workers and they end up wondering what mistake they did by doing their job.

One more dimension which has come recently is the number of healthcare professionals who are getting infected by COVID-19 as they are always in midst of these patients and it is very easy for getting infected in spite of protective gear. Most of these workers including doctors have long hours and they do not get enough rest in between, This is complicating matters and relentless work with exposure are making them susceptible for infection. Flexible working hours and recruitment of new doctors and nurses are very important in this direction.

2.2. The Epidemic Diseases (Amendment) Ordinance, 2020

The Epidemic Diseases (Amendment) Ordinance, 2020 which has been passed by the Union Cabinet manifests government of India's commitment to protect the healthcare workers who is instrumental in reinstalling the healthcare system in the country. This Act is an extension of The Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897 with a provision to punish the violators who makes violence against healthcare workers. Such an act will attract a non-bailable offence which can attract an imprisonment of up to seven years.

3. Discussion

3.1 Measures taken/to be taken to ensure the safety of Health workers

Now there is hope that attacks may reduce and people may treat the workers with more respect. The need of the hour is for the people to realise that the medical fraternity and ASHA workers are trying their level best to find out cases of COVID-19 and quarantine people to avoid community transmission. Also strict actions need to be taken if these incidents happen in future as well. Along with this, a change of attitude and cooperation is required from all citizens, towards these workers. There were cases being reported but we feel that this number would come down considerably as people are becoming aware of the importance of healthcare workers in this scenario.

Another concern for healthcare workers is contracting the disease from the patients. Here the authorities have responsibility of making sure that these workers are well protected and given sufficient medical cover. There needs to be policy changes across the world to protect the rights of healthcare workers. Countries like India have formulated insurance policies but we still have a long way to go. Moreover, there is an urgent need for coordinated efforts from all authorities concerned to make sure that there is enough protection for doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers. They are actually the vital cog in the fight against the pandemic and so a combined effort of monetary and non-monetary policies (insurance, ordinance, awareness campaigns etc.) is required to ensure their safety. This is going to be a long battle and the role of healthcare workers including doctors and nurses are paramount in winning this war.

Automation to prevent constant interaction of patients and healthcare workers can be done using technological advancements and machines. Effective counselling mechanisms are being evolved by medical fraternity so that there is constant monitoring of the mental well-being of doctors and nurses. These along with social distancing and strict measures by government, hopefully, will help in ensuring safety of the healthcare people.

4. Conclusion

As it is qualitative research there is no conclusion. But the main discussion of the article is about the safety of healthcare workers and different measures which are implemented like ordinance, social distancing, counselling and use of automation. These measures can help in keeping the healthcare workers healthy and safe but the authorities also need support of common man for effective implementation. Automation is an important measure as it will reduce the contact between patients and doctors. There is also need for more recruitment of these healthcare workers so that flexibility can be provided in the working hours. The review provides insights to the importance of measures to ensure safety of the workers which includes doctors and nurses in India. This will help the reader to understand the different mechanisms which have utmost importance to ensure eradication of the disease. Overall the concept of safety measures can be understood by the reader and also gain insights into the needs of medical system in India especially during emergencies.

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