ViewPoint

Stigmatization Towards Healthcare Workers During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Nepal

Ravi Ranjan Pradhan[1], Richa Nepal[2]

[1]Department of Internal Medicine, Provincial Hospital, Province-2, Janakpurdham, Dhanusha, Nepal

[2]Department of Internal Medicine, Bharatpur Hospital, Province-3, Chitwan, Nepal

ABSTRACT

COVID-19 is a novel disease that accompanies itself with anxiety, fear, and social stigma. As the numbers of COVID-19 cases continue to rise in Nepal, many instances of stigmatization towards healthcare workers have come to light. Rather than motivating healthcare workers to work during these adverse times, they are being ostracized as carriers of COVID-19. Despite the risks, healthcare workers are bearing for themselves and their families, very little has been done to protect them. Stigmas can be counteracted by awareness regarding this novel disease. It is important to aware people of correct practices and make them realize that this battle against COVID-19 can't be won without healthcare workers. Ensuring the safety of healthcare workers must be the foremost priority of the state. Healthcare workers are the most valuable asset for every country, who must be protected from acts of stigmatization at the earliest.

Keywords: COVID-19; Healthcare; Pandemic; Nepal; Stigmatization

Correspondence:
Dr. Richa Nepal, MD
Department of Internal Medicine,
Bharatpur Hospital, Bharatpur-10, Chitwan, Nepal
ORCID ID: 0000-0001-7576-2593
Email address: nepaldeepika123@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Infectious diseases like acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), tuberculosis, and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) were found to be associated with stigmas in the past, which have proven to be barriers for effective disease management.[1] Today, COVID-19 is a novel disease that accompanies itself with anxiety, fear, and social stigma which are compounded by ignorance and fear of contagion among the general public.[2] With tons of misinformation circulating in social media, the hysteria among the general public has fuelled up to an extent that public ostracism of healthcare workers has become common.

CURRENT SCENARIO IN NEPAL

'Tribhuvan University Teaching Hospital (TUTH) health workers face stigmatization with detection of COVID-19 case in the hospital' was the title of an article published in a leading daily few weeks back in Nepal.[3] With the detection of COVID-19 in a six-year-old inpatient of TUTH on 15th May 2020; a state of chaos ensued in and around the hospital. Frontline healthcare workers; mainly resident doctors and nurses, were being asked by their landlords to vacate their rented apartments. Many of them were being asked to show their reverse transcriptase-polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) reports of COVID-19 by their tenants to continue living in their apartments. The news of physical violence and abuse to healthcare workers by their neighbors and community as a whole has also surfaced in the media. Recently, a team of health workers from the Ministry of Health was deployed for contact tracing in one of the hotspots of COVID-19 in eastern Nepal. The team was treated as pariahs and denied lodging and flooding in the disease-stricken district. These examples represent just a tip of an iceberg with many more instances of stigmatization

towards healthcare workers coming to light, as the numbers of COVID-19 cases continue to rise in Nepal.

It is not just in Nepal, but incidents are reported from India, Philippines, Mexico, Australia, and many more.[4] Just days after the citizens of India cheered their front-liners by clapping their hands and clanging vessels, a dramatic incident surfaced on media, where two doctors who were on a door-to-door campaign for contact tracing, were stoned by a mob of 100 people in the city of Indore. In Mexico, doctors were doused in bleach and banned from public transportation over coronavirus transmission fears. It is completely disheartening and unlawful that healthcare workers are made soft targets for fulfilling their professional obligations during this time of global crisis. 'Stay home', 'work from home' are the slogans that all of us are hearing during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, healthcare workers are attending hospitals, treating the patients, and putting themselves at high risk of contracting the disease, given that personal protective equipment (PPE) are in acute shortage all across the country. Despite the risks, healthcare workers are bearing for themselves and their families, very little has been done to protect them.

Stigmatization towards healthcare workers adds to the physical and mental exhaustion that they bear in due course of their duty hours. Doctors or paramedical staff, who are trying to save lives during these adverse times, are denied entry into their apartments, and no provisions have been made by the management to accommodate or feed them; this scenario features the deplorable situation healthcare workers are facing during COVID-19 pandemic in Nepal. Nepal is the least developed country with a population of 29 million and has a total of 8274 confirmed cases of COVID-19 till June 19th, 2020. The ongoing pandemic of COVID-19 has challenged the health system all over the world. With the doctor-patient ratio of 1:1721 according to a recent survey, Nepal lags far behind the recommendation by the World Health Organization (1:1000).[5] As the pandemic accelerates, healthcare workers in Nepal will be overwhelmed beyond their capacity. Social stigmatization negatively impacts the performance of already overburdened healthcare workers who have been compared to war soldiers today. Without each one of them, this battle against COVID-19 can't be won. Thus, the state should protect them against such stigmatization at the earliest.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Stigmas can be counteracted by extensive awareness campaigns so that the general public would learn to be vigilant rather than being paranoid. The commitment given by the government to punish abusers must be brought to action effectively rather than just being the rhetoric. Untold stories of the sacrifices made by frontline healthcare workers must be voiced so that people know what healthcare workers are going through to save lives. Above all, ensuring the safety of healthcare workers by providing adequate PPE, proper accommodation and food, proper quarantine facilities and psychological support is the need of the hour. We need to make people realize that fight against COVID-19 is not just the responsibility of the health system of the country, but every citizen needs to behave responsibly by following infection prevention practices, social distancing, and supporting healthcare workers. Healthcare workers are the most valuable asset for every country, who must be motivated to work during these extraordinary times because if they stop working, we might stop living!

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