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COVID-19 and the mental health of professionals in the health sector in the UAE: An analytical study

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ABSTRACT

As the COVID-19 pandemic persists, the public health interventions reported that many individuals during this pandemic situation experience different circumstances that lead to their poor mental health performance, such as isolation stress, anxiety, depression, anger, confusion, and unemployment. The aim of this study is to examine the existing literature in a comprehensive manner and to explore the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of UAE health workers. This study also examined the psychological factors that influence workers' mental health due to the pandemic of COVID-19. An online questionnaire was administered to answer the research question. The results proved that the pandemic has affected both physical and mental health of UAE health workers. Consequently, the adoption of preventive actions at the governmental, organizational, and individual levels is highly recommended. In this research, the implementation of effective communication and the application of adequate psychological services have been suggested. To this end, the role of policy makers to be involved in placing governmental initiatives that prevent the spread of the virus and protect the mental health of workers has been highlighted.

Keywords: COVID-19, mental health, health workers, UAE

1. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 is a virus that infects human and animals and cause illness. When infected by coronavirus, humans have moderate to severe respiratory diseases. In the Chinese province of Wuhan, the epidemic of COVID-19 cases has been initially reported in December 2019. The disease has since spread to achieve pandemic status worldwide, impacting countries in Europe, the United States, the United Kingdom, the Middle East, Asia and North Africa, and other areas of the world. Numerous countries are working on vaccine development and drug creation, including numerous organizations in USA and China. (Usher et al., 2020).

As evidenced by past health emergencies, pandemics undoubtedly have adverse impacts on mental health. "For example, the 2003 Hong Kong outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) was characterized as a" mental health crisis "with long-term psychological illnesses such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and depression. Factors such as social care and pandemic-related fears have influenced the production of mental illness (Abdelghaffar et al., 2021).

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During pandemics, the most critical concerns of public health agencies and the media are typically the biological and physical impacts of the outbreak, with far less attention paid to mental health. With the strain of mental wellbeing during the COVID-19 epidemic, however, there have been increasing demands for increased help for mental health. In China, the National Health Commission released the first detailed emergency psychological crisis management guidance for people affected by COVID-19 on the 27th of January, 2020. The document has emphasized the need for multi-disciplinary mental health teams to provide people with mental health help and support (Qubais et al., 2020).

The fact that pandemics pose a threat to mental health is well known. Since COVID-19 has hit all nations of the globe, many countries have slowed down their economies and imposed pronounced constraints on public life to limit the pace of its spread. Accordingly, recent studies in the UAE have shown a consistent bad influence of COVID-19 on workforces' mental wellbeing, with 16-18% of respondents showing signs of anxiety and depression. The first research suggests that workers, women, younger individuals, and those with low quality of sleep are at an increased risk of mental health problems. The advent of social distancing, self-isolation, and lockdowns, for instance, reduces face to face social interaction with others; a model of communication proven to decrease the risk of depressive disorder (Wang et al., 2020). It is therefore extremely critical to identify employees who are at higher degree of danger due to exhaustion, depression, anxiety, and stress in order to provide assistance at the right time and location. Hence, identifying and resolving the variables responsible for this trauma is also equally essential.

This research analyzes and identifies the causative factors and the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of health workers in the UAE in terms of anxiety, depression, and stress. It also explores the roleplayed by the UAE government and policymakers to safeguard the mental workers' health in the current situation. The research is based on providing a literature review followed by a discussion for finding accurate purposes and information that is relevant for this field.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Pandemic situation of COVID-19 and its effects on the mental health of healthcare workers

As more governments have imposed lockdown measures in effort to reduce the proportion of people affected by COVID-19, more people have made significant adjustments to their daily habits (Spoorthy, Pratapa & Mahant, 2020). Examples of such life changes are related to home schooling, working remotely, losing jobs, and having less physical contact with other family members, friends, and work colleagues. Hence, it is challenging to adapt to new lifestyle challenges and deal with the stress of getting the viral infection and the concern about staying connected with persons who are extremely exposed (Torales et al., 2020).

The epidemic effects of COVID-19 are linked to both health and wellbeing with direct impact on mental and physical health. Fear of infection increased the likelihood of fear and depression among workforce due to the threat of close interaction with suspected cases, prolonged working hours without proper rest, and interrupted sleep and wake shapes (Xiong et al., 2020). Although COVID-19 outbreak has affected the population of the world, it could have a more considerable effect on the healthcare employees owing to higher issues associated with enhanced financial uncertainty and absence of community social support, especially among expatriate labors whose countries of provenance were greatly impacted by pandemic (Wang et al., 2020).

Healthcare workers or hospital staff are the most vulnerable in catching the virus, which is why according to a study, the most mentally affected workers by COVID – 19 are the healthcare workers (Shaukat et al., 2020). This study showed that the risk factors which cause mental impact on healthcare staff working in a department with COVID – 19 patients, a family member diagnosed with it, improper care of the hygiene of hands, especially after interacting with patients, unprotected exposure, improper PPE use, and prolonged contact hours in daily basis. Because of being at a high risk of catching the virus, hospital and healthcare workers are highly depressed, distressed, anxious, worried and are suffering from insomnia (Shaukat et al., 2020). This does not only impact the healthcare workers, but it also hinders the prevention of COVID – 19, since possible mental issues might hinder the staff from working properly during the pandemic (Torales et al., 2020; Barman and al., 2021).

No matter how this outbreak will be prevented or controlled, it has impacted the psychological and mental health of works quite considerably. This impact can be the representation of the mental health outcomes of the people inflicted with the deadly virus, or just people being concerned about

the virus in general, with regards to the decline in the socio-economic factor of their country because of a lockdown or the effect it has on the public. Explicitly speaking, workers might showcase different levels of psychological distress (Baburajan, 2021; Maqsood and al., 2021), and this report is especially dangerous for workers with pre-existing mental health problems (Talevi et al., 2020). The most common psychological reactions observed in the mental processes of workers were emotional distress, fear, frustration, loneliness, anger, boredom, depression, stress, and display defensive and avoidance behaviors. A strange syndrome called “Headline Stress Disorder” can be noted quite frequently during this pandemic among workers, which showcases stress and anxiety (Talevi et al., 2020).

Further research has exhibited that workers who never experienced any mental illnesses before are now inducing psychologically negative symptoms because of the pandemic. For the workers with already existing mental illness, the situation is worse. This category of workers is showing conditions where they are aggravated and cause distress both to themselves and their family, friends, and colleagues. These individuals have been developing rational and irrational fears about falling sick or dying from the virus, helplessness, and guilt when they could not help or soothe each pain of the near and dear ones affected, and blaming people who are ill with the virus, all of which can lead to an impactful mental breakdown and to have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD (Ho et al., 2020).

To tackle these mental problems, many countries have launched campaigns or programs to help the affected minds, soothe their stress and address other unwanted behaviors. For example, the UAE has established many campaigns, like the National Program for Happiness and Wellbeing that help patients with mental issues caused by the virus. Treating the mental health issues among healthcare workers is exceptionally important because they serve the roles that keep the nation from falling apart during a worldwide pandemic. Workers like medical healthcare workers experiencing these issues need to be acknowledged because they hold the power of controlling the virus and preventing it from making even more significant global impact.

To conclude the literature review section, the main hypothesis of the research is as follow:
H1: There is a significant impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of workers.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A mixed quantitative and qualitative research method has been used in the research. We have employed a deductive approach to determine the effect of novel coronavirus on the mental health of the health sector in the UAE. The current study is complemented by studies that focused on the effect of COVID-19 on the psychosocial quality of life of health workers. The primary data has been collected from authentic resources available online. For the secondary data, a survey has been prepared and shared for data collection. The online survey has been conducted using a convenience sampling method. It was administered to analyze the effects of the disease outbreak on the mental health of healthcare workers and the actions taken by the UAE government. The survey was shared with 52 participants. The response rate reached the satisfactory level of 100%.The participants were encouraged to fill the survey forms in their leisure time, and hence two days have been allotted to receive their responses. The participants were aware about the research objective, and they were invited to complete a digital consent form preceding the survey to express their willingness to take a part in this research. Data was analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistic 27.

4. RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS AND REGRESSION ANALYSIS

In order to validate the main hypothesis H1 that “There is a significant impact of COVID-19 on mental health of workers”, first, the data collected from the survey was statistically analyzed as shown in **Table 1**. Then, the primary and secondary data collected in this study were compared.

4.1 Regression Analysis

Table 1: Regression Statistics.

Regression Statistics					
Multiple R	0.439613629				
R Square	0.5693260143				
Adjusted R Square	0.15080015				
Standard Error	9.180762551				
Observations	10				

ANOVA					
	df	SS	MS	F	Significance F
Regression	1	383.6364758	383.6365	4.551582	0.046144404
Residual	50	1601.441619	84.2864		
Total	51	1985.078095			

	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value	Lower 95%	Upper 95%	Lower 95.0%	Upper 95.0%
Intercept	-27.24910795	12.28506162	-2.21807	0.038934	-52.96203744	-1.53618	-52.962	-1.53618
Mental Health	7.2384E-07	3.39283E-07	2.133444	0.046144	1.37137E-08	1.43E-06	1.37E-08	1.43E-06

The regression analysis results has proven that COVID-19 has impacted the overall mental health of health workers because the hypothesis has been accepted as significance value is $0.04 < 0.05$. Moreover, the variables that correlate COVID-19 with mental health of the workers is strong as the value of R-square is 0.56.

4.2 Findings in Light of Literature

The study conducted by (Wang et al., 2020) highlighted that people had faced severe mental health issues due to stress. The breadwinners have undergone mental pressure as they find it arduous to manage resources and arrange necessities of life for their families. Similar responses have been received in the secondary research that employees had high level of concerns of possible loss of close family members or getting infected which agrees with what has been reported recently that health care workers have developed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) with fear (Ho et al., 2020).

The results obtained from the secondary data analysis signify that the prevalence of COVID-19 has negatively impacted the mental health and wellbeing of the staff in health sector in the UAE. It has been discussed that the governance bodies of UAE have initiated programs to financially aid the residents of the country and launched mental health programs to help the people in coping up with stress, anxiety and financial crisis. For instance, in June 2020, the UAE government adopted a bonus scheme for vital sector workers during emergencies. Accordingly, front-line staff will be compensated for their work in times of crisis (Arabian Business, 2020). Also, according to the national newsletter (2020), "In recognition for their work, the UAE has enrolled more than 80,000 essential, frontline workers in a special program to provide them with professional, psychological and financial support. This includes mental health services, discounts, schooling as well as benefits for essential workers' families". Another interesting measure was adopted in October 2020 by the UAE government in favor of medical professionals and service care providers. In fact, these workers "were offered financial support for housing, provided with cheaper travel air fares, and given discounts at entertainment and hospitality venues in the emirate under a new agreement between the government and some private companies" (Sarwat Nasir, 2020).

Fetzer et al. (2020) claimed that the UAE government had launched emergency packages that were responsible for paying wages to the bread earners of the family. The results obtained also

suggested that the financial aid programs established by the UAE government were beneficial for the general public and decreased the level of stress they were going through (Fetzer et al. 2020). It has also been discussed that the UAE government has reduced the bill amount by 10% for both residential and industrial sectors and these measures were highly useful for the employees to sustain an income during the lockdown. Moreover, Al Thobaity, A., & Alshammari, F. (2020) observed serious issues that could affect UAE mental health of nurses due to staffing shortages, depression related to anxiety and fear of infection, lack of communication with patients, and exhaustion due to working long hours. To help in solving these potential issues, the UAE government launched a new portal to call on healthcare volunteers (El Sherif, 2020), to help the over-occupied health workers and to help reduce their workload and level of stress. Also, to cope with stress, fear, exhaustion, and anxiety hundreds of supplementary healthcare workers were urgently recruited from India in order to support the efforts of the actual healthcare workers and reduce their burden and maintain the delivery of comprehensive, continuous and timely healthcare services (Gulfnews, 2020). Finally, in recognition to their efforts and to dissipate their fear, the government prioritized healthcare workers vaccination against COVID-19 virus. Similar responses have been received by the secondary data have supported that the initiatives undertaken by the UAE government assist the public in managing resources for their families and the mental health programs helped people facing mental disturbance and psychological issues.

4.3 The role of the UAE government and policymakers in protecting the mental health of workers during the pandemic

COVID-19 would be a contagious disease when it travels across the globe, authorities in the UAE, China, Italy and many other countries have introduced severe initiatives for an unexpected and unforeseen scale, such as the imposition of quarantines and travel bans. The healthcare employees were among the most impacted by the negative outcomes of this pandemics. They were affected by massive physical, psychological, and emotional strain. In particular, boredom, frustration and loneliness can be faced by this category of workers and some studies have shown that these conditions are related to the poorer mental health of workers (El Hayek et al., 2020).

The World Health Organization has published a list of implications to overcome the mental well-being of the population at large and of particular high-risk groups in acknowledgement of the psychological effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Brunier and Drysdale., 2020). In the UAE, due to ongoing pandemic, health care workers are struggling with tension, exhaustion and other mental problems. To overcome this situation and to fulfill its ethical duties at the time of pandemics (Kooli, 2021), the UAE government provided guidelines to address and reduce poor mental health outcomes, such as the inclusion of mental health into the national COVID-19 response. Moreover, the UAE government has effectively communicated several COVID-19 online resources on coping with stress under the current circumstances in its (Talevi et al., 2020).

In this sense, government policies are considered key function in preventing the spread of the virus as well as protecting workers' mental health. For this reason, the UAE government is implementing certain services and policies aimed at financially and mentally helping workers before and after the pandemic. Consequently, the frequency of psychiatric illness during pandemics is minimized by government initiatives. UAE government has launched emergency packages that provide direct payments to workers; reduction of 10% of water and energy bills, both residential and industrial bills, for three months, and allocating credit and secures for businesses to pay the economic impact of the disease outbreak. Hence, the previous mentioned measures helped employees sustain an income through the pandemic and had a positive effect on their moral status (Fetzer et al., 2020).

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of this research, several recommendations can be made at three levels: Governmental, organizational, and individual. At the macro level, we conclude that organizations and policy makers should develop an awareness and organizational strategy based on some suggested insights. Preventive actions at the organization level, such as the implementation of effective communication and the application of adequate psychological services, should be undertaken to minimize the physiological and behavioral effects of the outbreak of COVID-19. Using some online media forums, health education needs to be upgraded. Social fear related to COVID-19 needs to be addressed as well. Hospital protocols related to early and influential emergency healthcare delivery must be imposed.

In order to sustain the government initiatives, the mental health of healthcare workers should be protected. For this purpose, programs and policies aimed at financially and psychologically supporting employees before and after the pandemic should be enforced by the government. At the microlevel, managers must develop a communications plan in partnership with human resource management experts to present policy choices relevant to the organization's business continuity plan throughout the disease outbreak. Managers should also maintain constant communication with their employees, whether they are fully present or not at work. Moreover, supervisors should include workers in the planning of the post-pandemic business plan, which will decrease the level of stress of employees, encourage a positive attitude and improve team structure.

The process needs to reduce workers' anxiety and their degree of stress, and coordination is also essential in this pandemic. In order to provide staff with precise details of what will happen after COVID-19, the key steps to be carried to restart organizations effectiveness, as well as the possible impact of such steps on the work of employees, should be shared. Moreover, to protect the workers' mental health during crises, social support services must be established by ensuring constant contact with staff, such as by holding daily online staff meetings. Staff aid should also be provided in this situation. Although executives are those who make it possible for companies to retrieve from a major catastrophe, they are not free from psychological problems; they also need the help of their team members by maintaining constant contact with them.

Employers are advised to take actions to protect the mental health of employees. Thus, the mechanisms of recognition of the symptoms that define stress and manage several automated resources exist nowadays. These tools help individuals to identify signs of stress that are used as therapy-based practices such as cognitive behavior therapy, mindfulness, mood-tracking to help people maintain their emotional wellbeing and get help online. Healthcare workers, need to benefit from the decrease of workloads, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) should be increased, and proper awareness should be spread about the risks of contracting COVID – 19, so that the mental issues can be prevented (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020).

It is also worth mentioning that employers need to encourage employees to take a walk or do any exercise. There is better connectivity for providing the efforts to keep the staff updated on any improvements and changes in the organization. Employers need also to clarify any operating hours and requirements that have been changed in order to mitigate the effects of the psychological effects of the pandemics. In addition, organizations need to eliminate pressure by setting workload goals, prioritizing what needs to be completed, and recognizing what could slide if possible. It offers policies and procedures for becoming generous and versatile as possible in reviewing policies and practices in response to the pandemic to minimize the burden on everyone. Employers need also to promote strategies that can encourage the staff to better prepare how they can treat their activities under self-isolation or quarantine and encourage individuals to discuss these anticipated programs and activities. When people are at home having symptoms and under quarantine, employers need to stay in touch with them and show solidarity during hard times.

At the individual level, being honest about mental health problems opens the way for workers to feel comfortable sharing their mental health issues. The process shows positive behavior that can support the mental health to others so that workers also show support and focus on to create boundaries for self-care.

6. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 outbreak impacts both physical and mental health. Due to the concerns of direct contact with an exposed individual, prolonged job duties without good rest, and disrupted wake and sleep phases, phobia with being contaminated has increased the likelihood of tension and worrying among healthcare workforces. Because mental disorders have been revealed to influence protection, the effects may be troubling, increasing the risk of catching the virus. Whereas the current disease outbreak is affecting the population of the world, it may have a deeper impact on healthcare employees due to direct exposure to the victims of the pandemic, and in some cases, the absence of community social support. The empirical analysis of this work has helped to support this observation and confirm the hypothesis that COVID-19 could have a significant impact on mental health of workers.

To conclude this research report, any nation needs to embrace community-based approaches to promote sustainability and emotionally weak individuals throughout the COVID-19 crisis. It is indeed crucial to openly recognize the psychological effect of anxiety and fear resulting from the fast

propagation of the pandemic. Hence, authorities and policy makers are recommended to rapidly adopt cognitive steps to limit the risk of disease and the dramatic consequences of the outbreak on mental health, and especially on healthcare workers.

This research offers useful knowledge that allows organizations during COVID-19 to consider the significant stressors and those that might continue to exist after COVID-19. Moreover, it offers knowledge on the major influencing variables that may reduce or exacerbate the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of healthcare workers. For this purpose, this study aims that these goals may be accomplished by the consistency of the literature reviewed in this paper. The recommendations outlined in this paper may help organizations and human capital professionals to develop a response plan for the period during and after COVID-19, to establish significant and rapid ongoing contact with their staff in order to strengthen relations between managers, human resources professionals and health and government officials. As the number of questionnaires covered by this research remains limited, future research need to cover an important number of employees over the world and deeply focus on most recent literature that highlights how pandemics pose a threat to mental health. The observed results and recommendations are mainly applied to healthcare workers, some of them could also be allied on different categories of workers and thus could help to protect their physical and mental health especially at the time of crises. Finally, this research focused only on presenting the good practices followed by the UAE government in order to mitigate the negative effects of COVID-19 on the mental health of healthcare workers. Our desire was to present these negative effects through concrete examples and data. It is worth noting that, at the time of publishing this work, no data was available about the situation of healthcare workers in UAE. Hence; no information about healthcare workers infected by the virus, nor the number of working days lost in the health sector were obtained. In addition, research that concretely presented an idea about the mental and physical healthcare workers in UAE was not disseminated. Therefore, it is recommended that more governmental transparency needs to be observed during such circumstances.

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