



A Study of Health Care Professionals Exposed Accidentally during the Prevailing Pandemic and Their Psychological Challenges

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Abstract: During the spread of Corona virus (SARS-CoV 2), health care professionals played a crucial role. In the course of saving lives, healthcare professionals (HCPs) have faced not only physical challenges, but also psychological challenges of various levels and types. The psychological challenges faced by HCPs at covid care centers have been extensively researched and published. This study aimed to highlight the psychological challenges that HCPs face in non-covid cancer care centers. The purpose of the study was to evaluate psychological challenges (physical changes, anxiety, perceived fear, depression, awareness and positivity) experienced by HCPs in a tertiary cancer care facility with purposive sampling (Doctors). Among HCPs, there was a significant fear and anxiety of getting infected and infecting their significant others. It was crucial to maintain an effective, encouraging and motivating workforce through psychological interventions at the right time.

Index Terms - psychological challenges, fear, anxiety, COVID-19, healthcare professionals, cancer care institute.

Introduction

According to WHO, COVID-19 is a disease caused by a new coronavirus called SARS-CoV-2. WHO first learned of this new virus on 31 December 2019, following a report of a cluster of cases of viral pneumonia in Wuhan, People's Republic of China. The first case of COVID-19 in India was reported on 30 January 2020 and COVID 19 outbreak was formally declared as a pandemic on 11 March 2020 with the publication of public health guidelines to guide the pandemic response¹. Currently as reported, India has been among the countries on the top in tallies having a maximum number (more than 26,000,000) of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Asia². Individuals having mild/moderate respiratory issues with COVID-19 infection requires no major treatment/hospitalization. On the other hand, WHO has also reported that populations above 60 years of age having comorbidities (for example- cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer) are at risk for getting infected easily than their non-co-morbid counterparts¹. Healthcare professionals (HCPs) have been observed to be the main power bank for charging up patients with positivity and optimism while taking care of them being front liners in the pandemic. On the other side of the coin, HCPs themselves suffered from depleted psychological health as a result of workload, fear, anxieties, and uncertainties revolving around them³⁻⁷ which pushed them to be at risk of developing psychological trauma/disorders. An increasing number of healthcare professionals around the world are getting involved in the crisis. They have a crucial role and are making a great contribution, but they have also faced and are still facing great challenges in their day-to-day activities. Their safety and health are of great concern for patient care and regular support to control the outbreak of pandemics⁸. A line of quantitative studies revealed the risk of deteriorated psychological health of healthcare professionals while treating patients with and without COVID-19 during this pandemic⁹. The purpose of this research was to explore the psychological challenges encountered by the healthcare professionals at tertiary cancer care centre, in northern India and the impact of those challenges on their wellbeing in the prevailing pandemic using a self-designed and self-report questionnaire.

METHOD

The self-made questionnaire for the survey consisted of 26 closed-ended items that took approximately 5-7 minutes to complete. The 26 item questionnaire consisted of items indicating symptoms of physiological changes experienced during the pandemic, anxiety, depression, fear, levels of awareness and positivity, and the source of perceived coping. For the survey, doctors (n = 111) of tertiary cancer care Centre, directly or indirectly involved in the patient care (i.e. Diagnosis, treatment, care) of the patient with COVID-19 were targeted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present study gave an insight into the healthcare workers in tertiary cancer care institute. In unprecedented times the health care workers were the real warriors. Thus, the training is given before help such a pandemic became very important.

The results show that the healthcare workers at tertiary cancer care center were well prepared for dealing with such exceptional times and came out as true warriors in fighting against COVID-19 and being of great help to the people admitted to the hospital.

As can be seen from Figure 1, the health care professionals showed only slight concern about their reduced energy level, bodily pains and discomfort, and disturbed sleep patterns. Due to the long hours of working conditions toward the admitted patients of COVID-19 which flowed in large number odd hours throughout the day, even at odd hours. Figure 2 shows that the level of anxiety was also very less among the healthcare workers. The worry and uncertainty of this pandemic did not discourage them and they were ready to take control of things. This shows that the healthcare workers at the study site are competent to deal with unmatched situations. The in-house psycho-oncology (counseling) team was also very active in helping the healthcare staff to relax and to discharge their emotions if any through catharsis.

Figure 3 reveals that there were slight concerns about developing COVID-19 from the patients. Since the healthcare workers were in close contact while giving treatment to the patients, the perceived susceptibility seems to be high. The doctors who were on the frontline feared that they might also develop the coronavirus and lose their lives as the nature of this disease was such that physical distance was the only protection from it. Figure 4 gives us an insight that most of the healthcare workers felt depressed while the course of the pandemic. The healthcare workers had to be incompletely isolated from their families where they could not meet their loved ones for days and their hours of the working period increased where they hardly got any time for themselves. Such conditions made them irritable, angry, lonely, and sad.

Figure 5 shows that there was a very high level of awareness and positivity among the healthcare workers of the tertiary cancer care Centre. The medical staff on the frontline was very optimistic about the approach toward the treatment of their patients. They were ready to give in extra hours understanding the expectations to work unconditionally irrespective of the personal risk involved. Overall, they seemed content during these challenging times. The regular psychological training for handling crises and being in a single specialty that to oncology with most uncertainties in the line of treatments helped the HCW's a lot.

According to researches done during the pandemic, lack of perceived support by HCP's during the time of the rise in confirmed cases & below the mark of PPE significantly contributed to the rise of psychological issues and depletion of the wellbeing of HCP's. With increasing cases and selfless involvement in treating COVID-19 cases, HCP's have put them under the self-scanner and have been undergoing psychological trauma as a result of the thought process - of being a source of infection to their family, friends, colleagues, and society as well. HCP's have been targeted unexpectedly for spreading COVID-19^{3,4} in the general population due to there, even accidental, exposure with patients having COVID-19. Due to this thought process, HCP's isolated themselves unconditionally to protect others from getting infected^{5,7,10} which in turn hampered their quality of life and work as well^{4,10} due to persistent stress and anxiety.

Many researchers revealed the risk of psychological vulnerabilities of HCP's while dealing with COVID-19 patients. It has been observed by Greenberg et al.,¹¹ Dai et al.,¹² and Chew et.al.,¹³ HCP's involved in the care of COVID-19 patients experience different levels of depression, anxiety, insomnia, stress, and psychosomatic symptoms. Psychologically safeguarding HCP's is important to maintain their effectiveness and efficiency in dealing the patients without biases and fear of getting stigmatized^{7,14}

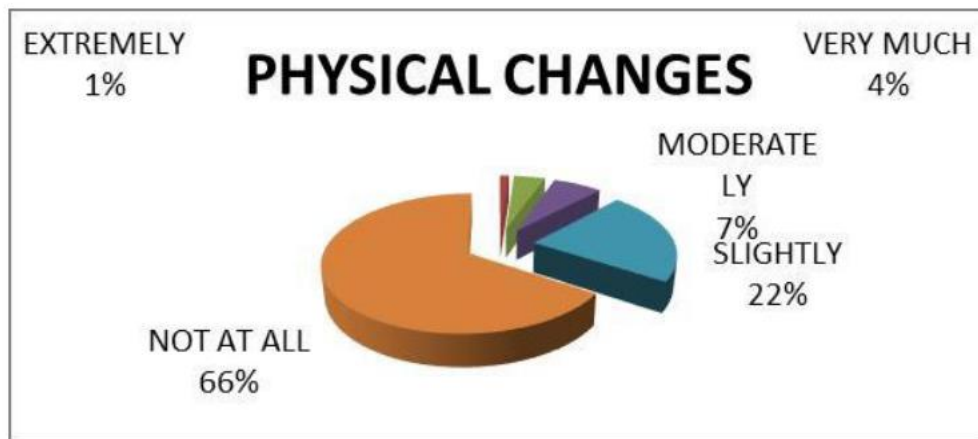


Figure 1: Physical Changes Perceived by Doctors during COVID-19

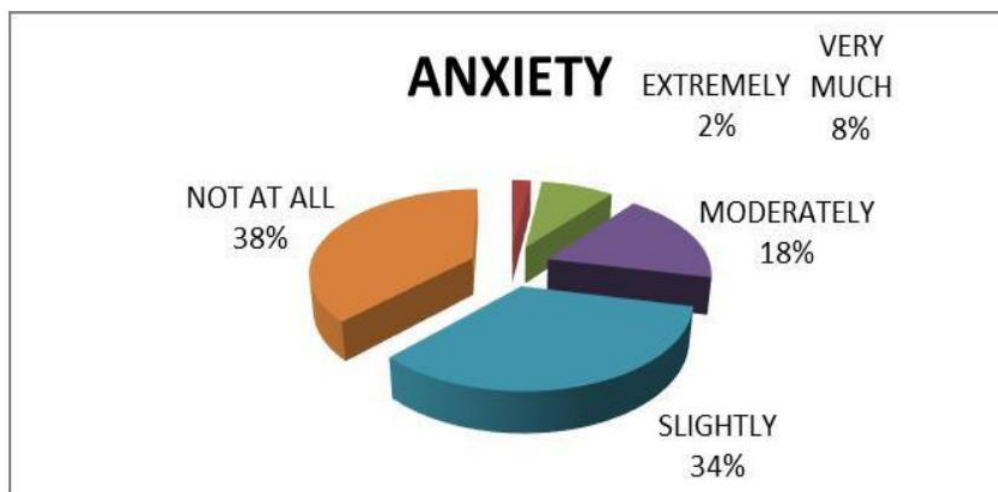


Figure 2: Anxiety during COVID-19

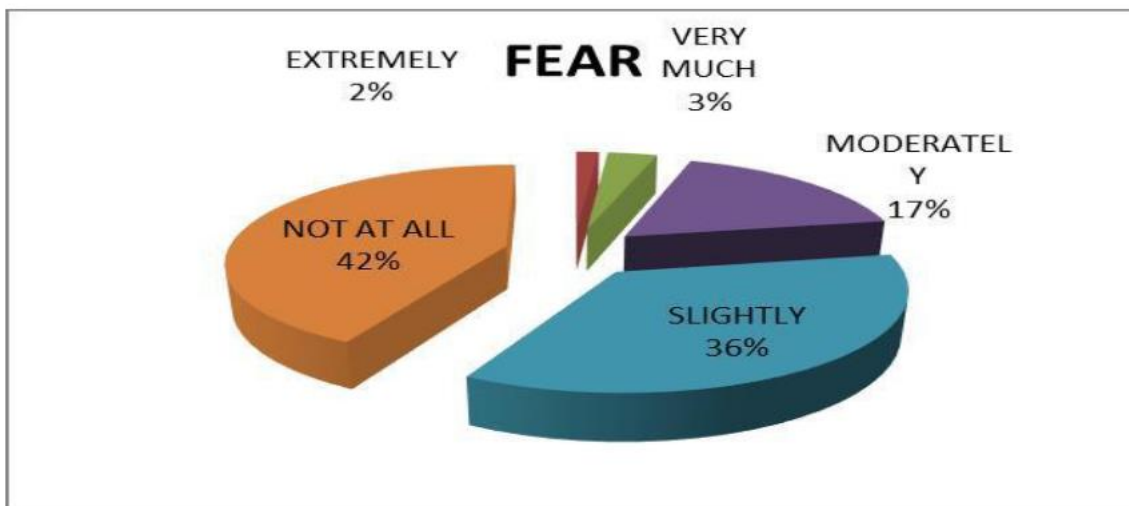


Figure 3: Perceived Fear during COVID-19

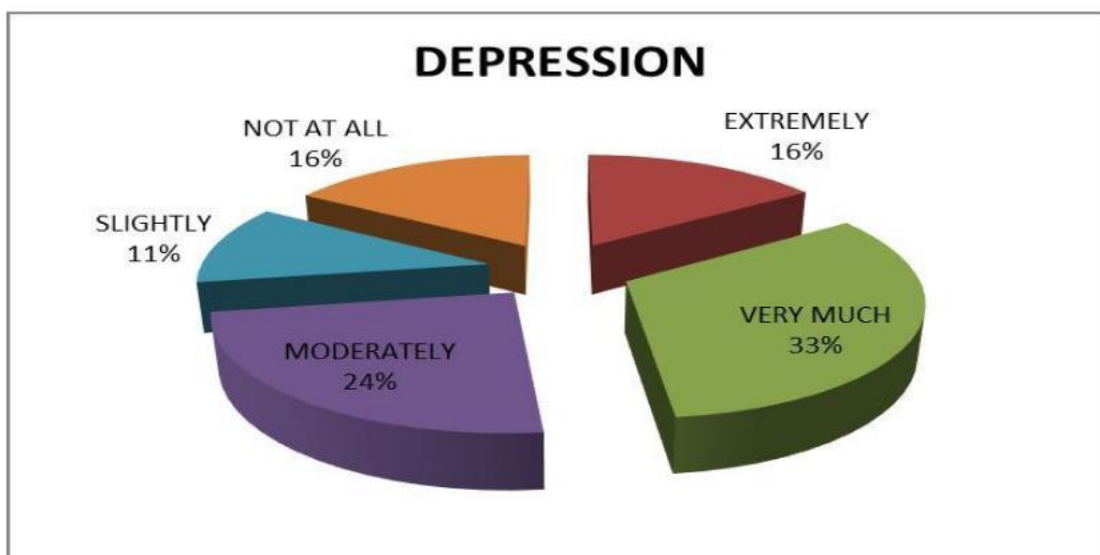


Figure 4: Depression among Doctors during COVID-19

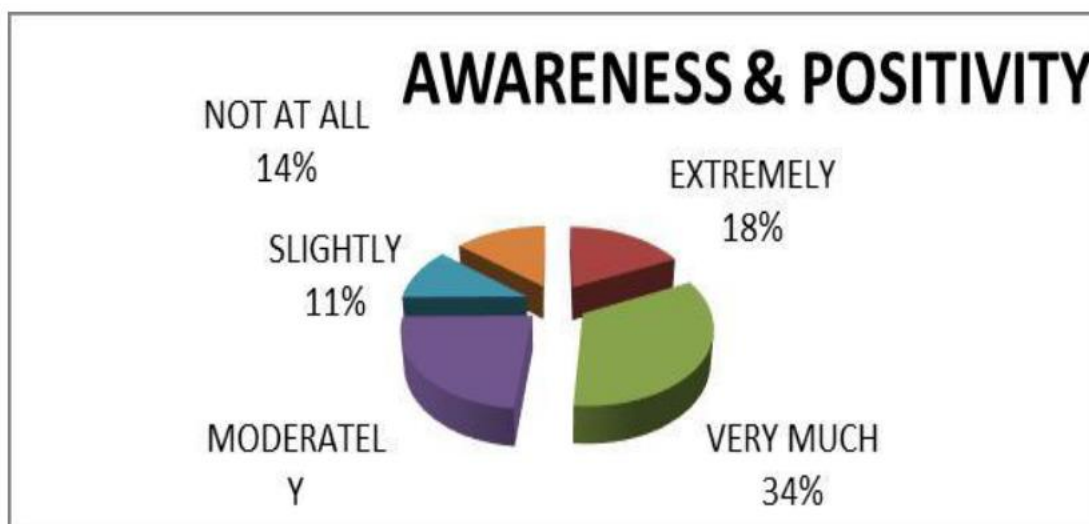


Figure 5: Awareness and Positivity during COVID-19

CONCLUSION

The present study made us understand and acknowledge psychological as well physical challenges encountered by HCP's during this pandemic. During COVID-19, the hospital did not seem to be equipped to deal with such a pandemic. There was fear and anxiety of getting infected and also infecting their loved ones back home was high but the healthcare workers at a tertiary cancer care site remained positive and cheerful despite being faced with long tiring hours of work, sleepless nights, and being away from family. The psycho-oncology team of the institute played a significant role in maintaining and enhancing the psychological adaptation of HCP's with the current scenario at the study site. The team has taken proactive steps to let HCP's understand the importance of Psychological wellbeing and safeguard their psychological health for effective as well efficient performance. HCP's were regularly provided with emotional and psychosocial support, sessions to de-stigmatized staff (those handling COVID19 patients and also who came in contact

with a positive patient) behavior and actions as well. Staff members were actively monitored and motivated through regular and need basis virtual counseling and psychological training sessions to reinforce individuals and teams to come forward and participate in patient care and by providing regular platforms to discuss wellbeing, stress, and burnout.

LIMITATIONS

The current study was conducted only at one center and that too with a super specialty in Oncology thus the results can't be generalized to other health care workers. In tertiary cancer care hospital, regular psychological training is imparted to the Staff of the hospital thus it becomes an imperative part for the results to be generalized.

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