

The health workforce – in need of a “booster” for mental health protection and violence prevention

On 17 March 2022, the European Public Health Association section ‘Health Workforce Research (EUPHA-HWR) and the Standing Committee of European Doctors (CPME) co-hosted a webinar entitled [‘The health workforce – in need of a ‘booster’ for mental health protection and violence prevention’](#). The objective was to address the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the health workforce, having battled a consistently high workload, stress and moral challenges and increasingly also hate and violence especially from those refusing vaccination. The webinar offered doctors, researchers and other healthcare professionals an opportunity to share their experiences and invite a broader audience to consider the need for action. In the opening of the webinar, co-chairs Dr Ellen Kuhlmann and Sarada Das highlighted the incidences of burnout and increase in professionals leaving the health sector since the pandemic. The co-chairs also highlighted the extreme circumstances health professionals are dealing with in the war in Ukraine and the opportunities to support them such as the Ukraine Medical Help Fund.

To launch the debate, Dr Daiva Brogienè and Dr Jacques de Haller representing CPME gave an overview on [‘Violence, stress and burnout: the hidden threats of the COVID-19 pandemic for healthcare professionals’](#). Based on the responses to a CPME survey on national medical associations’ experience of COVID-19 pandemic, doctors are exposed to a range of risks, ranging from the extreme workload aggravated by existing workforce shortages, to a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and the emotional burden of death and violence. To mitigate this impact, national medical associations offer a variety of tools such as helplines for their members to provide advice and support, recruiting volunteers to help with non-medical tasks in hospitals, and offering specific training. To commemorate those health professionals who lost their life to COVID-19, a commemorative plaque was unveiled in Codogno on 20 February 2021, on the occasion of the one-year anniversary of the first COVID-19 diagnosis in Europe. Lastly, CPME’s policy action to improve the situation of doctors was highlighted, such as the proposal for benchmarks for minimum health systems’ capacities such as safe staffing levels, and minimum capacities of PPE.

To continue, Dr José Santos representing the European Council of Medical Orders (CEOM), summarised [‘European Medical Organisations’ action on violence against health professionals’](#). Having addressed the topic since 2016, CEOM convened a working group composed of various European-level organisation representing doctors in 2020 to coordinate joint action. Since its creation, it has established 12 March as the European Awareness Day on violence against doctors and other health professionals. It has also continuously discussed the scope of the problem, and for example extended the discussion to also consider burnout as a type of violence. During the pandemic, the working group addressed the specific challenges resulting from the emergency situation, highlighting i.a. the insufficiencies in the healthcare system, in particular staff shortages, but also stigma against health professionals as potential carriers of the disease. Most recent discussions have reaffirmed health professionals’ rights to be protected from all physical and psychological violence and enjoy an environment with low degree of psychosocial risks. This idea will be elaborated on with a view to the working group’s future activities.

The co-chairs then shifted the focus from the point of view of professionals to the outlook of the research community. Dr Véronique S. Grazioli from the Center for Primary Care and Public Health and Chair of Medicine for Vulnerable Populations at University of Lausanne was invited to speak on [‘Fears to contract COVID-19 and future affective responses in healthcare workers: findings from Lausanne’](#). Due to technical problems, she was unfortunately not able to participate in person, therefore her presentation was made available after the event. Her focus is on perceived risk among health professionals linked to COVID-19 and its relation to depression, anxiety, burnout and secondary traumatic stress symptoms over time. An observational longitudinal study among staff of

the hospital in Lausanne showed that a “higher levels of fears reported greater scores on depression, anxiety and [secondary traumatic stress symptoms] measures 6 months later.” She goes on to suggest that interventions supporting health professionals should be considered with a view to managing future pandemics.

To complement these findings, Dr Ellen Kuhlmann presented the outcomes of research she carried out with PD Dr Alexandra Dopfer-Jablonka at the Hannover Medical School, Clinic for Rheumatology and Immunology. Looking at [‘The gap between infection protection and individual perceptions: findings from a COVID-19 study at Hannover Medical School’](#), the study surveyed more than a thousand health professionals as to their perception of risks, protection and preventive measures and then went on to compare the outcomes to medically approved infections. The result showed a low level of perceived protection among half of all participating health professionals which translated into a level of perceived personal risk which lay 14 percentage points above the medically approved infections. This was especially high among nurses. The study findings suggest that a combination of training, communication and participatory governance may help alleviate health professionals’ fears.

The co-chairs then opened the floor for discussions with the audience. There was strong interest in the topic and agreement that violence and mental health risks need greater attention in health policy and health workforce management and that more data and research must be collected including a wider range of the health workforce. Dr Ellen Kuhlmann and Sarada Das thanked the speakers and all participants for the fruitful debate.

Sarada Das, Deputy Secretary General of CPME, and Dr Ellen Kuhlmann, President of the EUPHA-Health Workforce Research, Brussels/Hannover, May 2022