



## Stigma Against Health Care Professionals During COVID-19

August 2020

### Background

COVID-19 has increased levels of anxiety amongst the general population as well as health care providers. An increase in tension and anxiety has manifested in [racism and othering of various populations](#), and misinformation about COVID-19 has been pervasive online and across social media. These are times of high tension and while violence and othering can never be condoned, it is understandable that in a time of global pandemic, tensions are high. During this period, we have also seen great support and displays of community connectedness. In particular, the '7pm cheer' was a way for people to demonstrate their gratitude to health and essential service workers for their efforts on the front lines during this pandemic. Paradoxically, although health care providers were among the first to be celebrated for their service, stigmatization and discrimination of them has also been on the rise<sup>i</sup>.

A recent University of British Columbia study conducted by Steven Taylor, Professor of Psychiatry and published in the Journal of Anxiety Disorders entitled "Fear and avoidance of health-care workers: An important, under-recognized form of stigmatization during the COVID-19 pandemic" highlights the mistaken belief that health care workers pose a danger to the general public. Part of this study was a survey that indicated that half of those polled either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "I do not want to be around health care workers who treat COVID-19 patients."<sup>ii</sup> Moreover, one quarter of those who took the survey wanted to restrict freedoms of health care workers, and more than one-third believed they should be isolated and separated from their families.<sup>iii</sup> In an article from spring 2020, Christine Sorensen, BC Nurses Union (BCNU) President indicated that the BCNU had heard from nurses who were being discriminated against in their communities noting that they are being denied services, apartment rentals etc. out of fear they may transmit the virus.<sup>iv</sup>

While we continue to learn about COVID-19 it is critical to understand that misinformation and stigma profoundly impact those against whom this misinformation and stigma is perpetuated. Stigma is generally borne out of fear and, at its root, fear comes from uncertainty and often a lack of knowledge. When misconceptions spread about a particular group, in this case health care providers, it can lead to anxiety, avoidance and isolation.<sup>v</sup> Health care workers may become concerned about leaving their homes to shop and/or may cease to seek services. According to the World Health Organization, health care providers are increasingly seen as a 'risk' rather than a solution to this public health emergency.<sup>vi</sup> Moreover, the stresses of working in a time of COVID-19 are taxing enough that adding stigma to this only serves to further negatively impact the mental health of health care providers.

The key in shifting this narrative is to communicate clearly about COVID-19 by ensuring that evidence-based information is shared widely. Nurses are experienced professionals who work with infectious diseases every day. Understanding how to protect themselves and others from infectious disease using evidence-based protocols is fundamental to nursing practice competence. Nurses have the skills, expertise and knowledge to answer critical questions for patients, interpret the science, and mitigate concerns by providing potentially life-saving information and action at all times, but most importantly during a public health crisis. It is also important to note that as of August 2020, nurses accounted for approximately 180 COVID-19 infections. Nursing is the largest of the health professions (worldwide) with approximately 57,000 registrants across the province, meaning the incidence of COVID-19 in nurses is extremely low.<sup>vii</sup>



## Key Messages

- COVID-19 has increased general levels of anxiety and worry amongst the general population as well as health care workers.
- Recent studies and anecdotal evidence indicate that health care workers, and nurses specifically, have been stigmatized and discriminated against as a result of perceived concerns that they are somehow 'more likely to infect' people than others.
- NNPBC supports open communication and evidence-based knowledge to help combat misconceptions about COVID-19.
- NNPBC strongly condemns stigmatizing health care workers which only adds to stress at a time when stress and burn-out amongst health care providers is already high.
- Nurses are experienced health care professionals who work safely with infectious diseases every day.
- NNPBC does not condone stigma or 'othering' of any kind.
- Nurses have the skills, expertise and knowledge to answer critical questions for patients, mitigate concerns and provide potentially life-saving information and action at all times, but most importantly during a public health crisis.
- As of August 8, 2020 the incidences of COVID-19 infections amongst health care workers is quite low, under 20%, with nursing constituting under one quarter of these in spite of being the largest of the health care provider groups.

## Further Reading/Resources

- [B.C. nurses complain of discrimination amid COVID-19](#)
- [Centre for Addiction and Mental Health- Stigma and Prejudice](#)
- [WHO-Attacks on health care in the context of COVID-19](#)
- [Journal of Anxiety Disorders: Fear and avoidance of healthcare workers: An important, under-recognized form of stigmatization during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)

Please feel free to direct questions and additional comments to [info@nnpbc.com](mailto:info@nnpbc.com).

<sup>i</sup> [Journal of Anxiety Disorders: Fear and avoidance of healthcare workers: An important, under-recognized form of stigmatization during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)

<sup>ii</sup> [Journal of Anxiety Disorders: Fear and avoidance of healthcare workers: An important, under-recognized form of stigmatization during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)

<sup>iii</sup> [Journal of Anxiety Disorders: Fear and avoidance of healthcare workers: An important, under-recognized form of stigmatization during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)

<sup>iv</sup> [B.C. nurses complain of discrimination amid COVID-19](#)

<sup>v</sup> [Centre for Addiction and Mental Health- Stigma and Prejudice](#)

<sup>vi</sup> [WHO-Attacks on health care in the context of COVID-19](#)

<sup>vii</sup> [Medicine Matters- breakdown of health care worker COVID-19 infections](#)