

Experience of Nigerian Physicians during the COVID-19 Pandemic: a Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The COVID-19 pandemic has affected healthcare workers in Nigeria including. This has caused several problems and has affected the psychological of the frontline workers. Also due to the shortage of supplies such as the N95 facemask and personal protective equipment (PPE), has led to the reuse and sterilization of medical supplies manufactured as disposable materials.

Objectives: To investigate the experience of doctors during this trying time of their career

Methodology: This is part of a larger study. An open-ended question was asked at the end of the questionnaire if respondents had any comment about COVID-19.

Results: a wide range of responses were given which was analyzed into themes.

Conclusion: Doctors need support, there is also a need to address other infectious diseases that are ravaging Nigeria and the African continent.

Introduction

The corona virus-2019 abbreviated as COVID-19 is a global health emergency that has affected several countries. A disease that spreads globally is known as a pandemic¹. It started in late 2019 and has caused a great impact and change worldwide² infecting people worldwide²⁻⁵. Since the influenza pandemic that occurred in 1919, COVID-19 is the first pandemic that has affected the respiratory system⁵.

The first case of COVID-19 in Nigeria was diagnosed on the 28th of February 2020 by an Italian. Since then the numbers have been rising. As of 25th April 2021, the number of cases in Nigeria was 164,756 with 2,062 deaths according to worldometer⁶. As of August 2020 in Nigeria, 2175 healthcare

workers have contracted the SARS-CoV2 and 122 healthcare workers in Rivers State from 97 public and 25 private hospitals¹. By the 11th of August 2020 in Rivers State, Southern Nigeria, three healthcare workers died of COVID-19 with 106 healthcare workers had contracted the novel virus¹. More than 10,000 healthcare workers in Africa have been infected with the SARS-CoV-2 from 40 countries and globally 10% of the people infected with COVID-19 are health workers⁷. During any disease outbreak, a serious problem is healthcare workers contracting the infection at the medical workplace⁴. The role played by healthcare during the COVID-19 pandemic in curtailing the novel virus cannot be overemphasized^{3,8-10}. Several people have been infected globally⁸.

In any country, healthcare workers are vital resources they possess therefore the workforce in the health sector should be placed in high priority⁴. Physicians globally are working hard to curtail the spread of the disease, even in Nigeria. The pandemic has also put a lot of strain on the health systems and healthcare workers have been drafted to work in facilities dedicated to COVID-19 quarantine and treatment centres^{4,5,11}. This has hurt healthcare professionals including physicians which include emotional and physical impact¹⁻⁴. The effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic is made by doctors¹². This is because they are on the frontline in the fight against COVID-19. Physicians are the ones who have conducted several studies on COVID-19 to identify its symptoms and signs, clinical manifestation and laboratory diagnosis, treatment and even the discovery of vaccines. As doctors are caring for patients infected with this infectious disease, they can also contract the virus from their patients as COVID-19 is now an occupational hazard at the medical workplace. There are several impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic as people get infected including economic and psychological consequences.

Healthcare workers working in the frontline are the worst hit by medical, mental and psychological impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic^{9,12,13}. Some of the doctors drafted to work in the COVID-19 treatment centres do not have any expertise in the management of infectious disease⁴. Physicians are affected mostly by the medical and psychological impact of COVID-19². Healthcare workers are at risk of contracting infections and diseases in the course of their work that is why

universal precautions must be practiced always. This causes physicians to be highly vulnerable to COVID-19 and also transfer it to their patients¹⁴. This worsened due to the global shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE). Therefore PPEs must be provided continuously with training on infection prevention and control procedures¹³. Healthcare workers are certainly important in healthcare delivery especially during the challenging times of COVID-19. This pandemic has caused a lot of changes in healthcare systems globally and several healthcare workers have been infected including doctors¹⁵. Therefore it is vital to evaluate the experiences of physicians during the COVID-19 pandemic ranging from infection prevention and control procedures, psychological and emotional impacts of COVID-19 and burnout among doctors during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Methodology

This is a qualitative and pilot study on the experience of doctors working in Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is part of a larger study on infection prevention and control procedures among doctors in Nigeria. This study comprised of structured questions and an open-ended question if the research participant had any comment on the topic. The responses were analyzed into themes. The study was web-based and a self-administered questionnaire was administered to research participants using social media platforms. The inclusion criteria for this study was doctors and dentists working in Nigeria while other categories of health professional working in Nigeria and physicians of Nigerian descent practising outside the shores of Nigeria were

excluded from this study. The research was approved by the National Health Research Ethics Committee of Nigeria (NHREC) with

the ethical approval number NHREC/01/01/2007-25/08/2020

Results

This study was conducted in 2020 among 23 doctors practising in Nigeria. Table 1 shows the demographic profiles of the research participants. The majority of the research participants 53.2% (12), were of the age range of 35-44 years. All the respondents work in a hospital located in urban cities.

Table1: Socio-Demographic Profile

The age range in years	N (%)
25-34	7(30.4%)
35-44	12(53.2%)
45-54	3(12.0%)
55-64	-
> 65	1(4.3%)
Sex	
female	12(52.2%)
male	11(47.8%)

Comments on infection prevention and control on COVID-19 was made by 32 doctors residing and practising in Nigeria. The socio-demographic profile of the research participants is outlined in Table 1. Table 2 shows the thematic responses of the research participants.

Table 2: Responses of research participants

S/N	Theme	Quotations
1	Need for preparedness for emerging and re-emerging diseases	'We should do more and be prepared to handle and manage other emerging and re-emerging disease' 'Nigeria need more clinical infectious diseases experts' 'Healthcare in Nigeria needs an overhaul'
2	Importance to conduct studies on COVID-19 impact on doctors	' I am currently one of the COVID-19 case managers and it gives me joy seeing my patients bounce back to good health after few days by treatment'
3	Poor support and improved welfare for healthcare professionals	'Would this review be used to improve the quality the quality of welfare of health workers or it is for academic purposes?' 'Nigerian government have to sit up at every level' 'There is poor support for health workers who caught COVID' 'Although the hospital where I work has provided the training and facilities to work with COVID-19, they have failed in staff recruitment and compensation. Doctors recruited still have to carry their routine

		work, increasing their stress levels putting a wider population at work' 'I think will help to identify how well different centres are doing and how much support as much as the awareness they have' 'I feel there should be more mental health support for healthcare workers'
4	Neglect of tropical diseases	'Africa and Nigeria need to focus more on tropical issues like water-borne diseases, malaria, and community health and safety
5	Adherence to infection prevention and control measures always	'Isolation centre staff should not think of protecting themselves alone but try to prevent the spread from one patient to another while at work by regularly changing their gloves and disinfecting shared equipment' 'Infection prevention and control measures should be adhered to always'
6	Provision of personal protective equipment	'Heads of hospitals should take responsibility for providing adequate PPE for their staff and provision of conducive environment' 'The hospital where I work are not concerned about the protection of healthcare workers. Doctors have to personally buy PPE such as the N95 facemask, face shield, hand gloves, soap, etc' 'Measures should be put n place to strongly protect frontline workers as this is not the case in my health facility'

Discussion

Healthcare systems globally are challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic⁴. Respondents gave a wide range of responses which was categorized into six themes. A wide range of responses was given for the importance of health systems to be prepared always for the emergence of any new or novel disease as it can be a public health emergency and a threat to the entire populace. It is also necessary at this time to conduct studies on the impact of COVID-19 on doctors.

Doctors are on the frontline in the war against the novel virus. Poor support for healthcare workers in Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore there should be improved welfare. One of the respondents asked a question if the result of the study is merely for academic purposes or it will be used to improve the welfare of doctors. During this pandemic, so much resource has been spent on COVID-19, therefore, neglecting tropical diseases in Nigeria. Tropical diseases have been the cause of morbidity and mortality before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. They seem to have been
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neglected as everyone is now focused on the ongoing pandemic. Infection prevention and control measures are an important aspect in the control, curtailing and trying to end the pandemic which in the end will have a positive effect on the morbidity and mortality of COVID-19. PPE is necessary for adherence to infection prevention and control measures. PPE are important in the management of patients with severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2.

The world is trying to adapt to the new normal caused by the COVID-19 pandemic due to some of the preventive measures put in place to curtail the spread of the novel virus. Healthcare workers including physicians are not spared as they are the worst hit whether or not that they are working in isolation centres or health facilities dedicated to the management of patients with infectious disease. Any doctor who has contact with sick patients is at risk of contracting it from that patient. Healthcare workers need to access updated information on the risks faced by healthcare workers as the disease is evolving rapidly¹⁵. Hence it is necessary to conduct

studies on COVID-19 amongst doctors and other categories of healthcare professionals. It is also necessary as healthcare workers are the front lines in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic¹⁶. Doctors need to be prepared always for any emerging diseases. This is because physicians and all healthcare workers are important in the health workforce in the infrastructure of the health systems¹⁷. According to this study, healthcare workers need support and improvement in welfare, especially mental health and social support. Mental health support is very important for healthcare workers who have been infected with COVID-19 according to one of the research participants who had been infected with COVID-19. Healthcare workers can become psychologically distressed by battling with COVID-19¹³. Other qualitative studies conducted on COVID-19 have revealed that healthcare professionals are vulnerable to mental health problems during the COVID-19 pandemic such as depression, stress, anxiety and stress is more among healthcare workers working in the frontline¹⁸.

According to Mbage et al (2020), social support is necessary especially for healthcare workers who are battling with emotional challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic¹⁵. This is similar to studies conducted in Bayelsa State, Southern Nigeria, where respondents in this study had a low level of motivation and were afraid of contracting the virus at their workplace¹⁹ and a qualitative study in which physicians working in the COVID-19 dedicated centre in Pakistan faced physical and psychological distress³. For sustainable delivery of healthcare during the COVID-19 pandemic, mental and physical health and wellbeing of healthcare professionals is vital²⁰.

According to this study, the welfare of healthcare workers especially doctors and nurses have been neglected. Doctors need to be supported in their work especially at this challenging time. Personal protective equipment is important in protecting the

healthcare workers and also infection prevention and control measures cannot be adhered to without PPE.

The poor attitude to work by some healthcare workers during the pandemic may be due to a lack of support from the health managers and medical chief executives²¹. Despite the global shortage of PPE, healthcare workers need to protect themselves always and also practice infection prevention and control measures always including practising universal precautions as it will prevent patient to doctor, and the doctor to patient transmission of the novel virus^{1,22}. Doctors both physicians, trainees and medical students are confronted with challenges in the course of their work²³ that can lead to moral distress that affects their mental and physical health, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has several impacts on the world and physicians are not exempted. Hence it is necessary to conduct studies amongst healthcare workers and COVID-19 as they require support and their welfare needs to be improved. Doctors need to be prepared for any emerging and reemerging diseases. During this difficult time, the pandemic, tropical diseases which led to morbidities and mortalities have been neglected. Healthcare workers need to adhere to infection prevention and control measures and healthcare workers need to have access to PPE in the course of their work.

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