

# A call for compassion for front-line health workers

Dr David Okello looks at a neglected aspect of health workforce motivation amid the COVID-19 crisis

2021 has been designated by WHO as the International Year of Health and Care Workers in appreciation and gratitude for their unwavering dedication in the fight against COVID-19 pandemic. In order for it to be beneficial, this year-long campaign must explore ways of how healthcare workers can be more intentional about self-compassion while striving to show compassion to others. In this article, we discuss the critical issues in



compassion for healthcare workers, highlighting what could be done to help them cope with the challenges they face in line of duty.

The definition of compassion encompasses the recognition of the suffering of others and the need to act to help. It embodies a tangible expression of our humanity of love for those who are suffering, and a desire to alleviate the distress of others. It is the knowledge that there can never be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy for you too. Lack of understanding of how to handle colleagues who are working under very stressful conditions can have major consequences on the psychological wellbeing and the performance of healthcare workers. Supporting their psychological wellbeing must continue to be a priority for health systems managers and the general public.

## Experience from the field in Uganda

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged and exceeded the capacity of hospitals and intensive care units (ICUs) in all countries. Healthcare workers have continued to provide care for patients despite exhaustion, personal risk of infection, and fear of transmission to family members, illness or death of friends and colleagues, and the loss of many patients. Sadly, healthcare workers have also faced many additional sources of stress and anxiety: long shifts combined with unprecedented population restrictions and personal isolation, which have affected their ability to cope.

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Front-line healthcare workers dealing with COVID-19 have expressed serious concerns regarding the conditions of services and the level of support they get from their managers. They complain about inadequate supply of personal protection equipment (PPE), and limitations in the infrastructure for ICUs which make them vulnerable to contracting the infection at the workplace.

During the lockdown, some of them were reassigned to work in units with long working hours, exerting emotional stress and physical exhaustion.

Insufficient resources and the absence of specific treatments for COVID-19 added to the challenges of managing severely ill patients. The fear of transmitting COVID-19 to loved ones led many to self-isolate from their families for months. Above all, they felt neglected from lack of a caring attitude from managers.

## What can be done?

We need to display greater kindness and empathy towards colleagues. Employers should love the people they lead and win their trust; feel for each other and share their pains. Front-line healthcare workers should be given sufficient rest, time off and provided with basic tools to do their work.

Building leadership capacity and awareness on issues of compassion among supervisors and leaders at all levels is critical. We should also raise population and community awareness about the issues faced by health workers. We can take lessons from a recent event in the UK. People across the country took part in mass applause for nurses and other front-line NHS staff, in praise of their work during the COVID-19 pandemic. The 'Clap for Our Carers' initiative saw residents applauding from their doorsteps, windows and balconies, and motorists joining in by hooting their horns. Such simple acts of appreciation will go a long way to boost the morale of health workers.

What can we all do to raise awareness about compassion for healthcare workers?