



The BMJ

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2024;386:q1969<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.q1969>

Published: 9 September 2024

Covid:19: NHS staff still struggling with “traumatic memories” of pandemic, report finds

Elisabeth Mahase

Doctors and other NHS staff are still dealing with the devastating events they experienced during the covid-19 pandemic, whether seeing patients, colleagues, and loved ones die or feeling fearful for their own lives, a report by the UK Covid Inquiry has found.¹

The inquiry’s Every Story Matters team has been tasked with collating the personal experiences that have been shared with the inquiry during its investigation. As part of their first report they have looked at the lasting effects of the pandemic on doctors and other healthcare staff and the availability of support for them during and since. The team found that many healthcare staff struggled to deal with “overwhelming” workloads and the sheer number of patients who were dying, especially as many were also facing the deaths of their own family members, friends, and colleagues.

“Experiencing so many deaths had a huge emotional impact on many in the healthcare workforce who shared their stories with us,” the report said. “Many contributors said they experienced damaging impacts on their mental health and wellbeing. Some shared how helpless they felt in the face of so many lives being lost.”

One paramedic told the team, “I know that I see a lot of trauma a lot of the time, but this . . . was on a different kind of level. It was something that none of us had experienced. And everyone was sort of just winging their way through this situation, that no one really knew how to handle, but we were trying our best.”

A hospital nurse described how their small hospital was dealing with 80 deaths a day at one point. “We couldn’t store the bodies. We had to bring in a massive, big freezer unit, which was just humongous, just to put these bodies in. I’ve never, ever seen anything like that. Just to like go up and see the bodies lined up in the corridor was quite . . . yes, it was emotional. It was quite devastating to just see, it continues to have an impact on me.”

The report emphasised that healthcare professionals were also facing the “same personal challenges everyone in society did,” from school closures to caring for vulnerable loved ones, and this only added to the pressure on them. This led to many staff members experiencing a deterioration in their physical and mental health. “You didn’t have time for having mental health issues, you just needed to get on with it because you were doing a job and you were, you felt like you were fighting for your own life every day,” said one A&E doctor.

Dealing with death of colleagues

On top of their workload and personal pressures, staff were very aware of the risk to their own health from the virus but believed that their sacrifices were not “properly recognised and compensated,” the report said.

Staff also shared how difficult they found it when colleagues died. “They grieved them deeply even if they did not know them personally. There was a sense of unfairness that some healthcare workers died and a concern for the devastating impact on their loved ones,” the authors wrote.

One hospital porter who lost a close friend and colleague was left questioning whether the risk was worth it after the hospital failed to provide any support to the bereaved family. “He caught it from the hospital, from the work he was doing . . . He got infected from there, but no one from the hospital had given any bit of support to his family, and that was the saddest part.”

Looking at the wider support provided to staff at the time, the report found much variation between employers, with some people reporting that their workplace set up support hubs and encouraged people to take breaks throughout the day, while others said they received no emotional or mental health support.

A few staff members told the team they were frustrated that the support was put in place without asking what was most needed. “I feel that we kept getting told what the hospital were doing for staff and things, but I don’t think they ever asked the staff what would make a difference to being at work. I think it was also the little things, like they would have said being able to park . . . being able to go for lunch in a chillout space,” one hospital doctor said.

Lasting impact of pandemic

The report found that many healthcare professionals were “still processing what had happened to them,” including their “traumatic memories of delivering care during the pandemic.”

One paramedic told the team, “I don’t think I’ve come back to 100% of how I normally was. It takes its toll. But it’s almost like having this piece of paper, that’s nice, and flat, and straight, and then you’ve crumpled it and then you try and straighten out that piece of paper again. It’s still creased up, no matter how much you try and straighten it out.”

Another healthcare worker said their colleague had died by suicide towards the end of the pandemic. “We will never know why they took their own life,

BMJ: first published as 10.1136/bmj.q1969 on 9 September 2024. Downloaded from <https://www.bmj.com/> on 11 April 2025 by guest. Protected by copyright, including for uses related to text and data mining, AI training, and similar technologies.

but we know the pandemic had a significant impact on their mental health,” they said.

Staff told the report team that lessons had to be learnt about supporting and valuing healthcare professionals. The team called for the government and healthcare system to “do more to support and reward staff, recognising the lasting impact of a crisis like the pandemic.”

If you're struggling, you're not alone. In the UK and Ireland, Samaritans can be contacted on tel 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org or jo@samaritans.ie. In the US, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 1-800-273-8255. In Australia, the crisis support service Lifeline is 13 11 14. Other international helplines can be found at www.befrienders.org

1 Every Story Matters Healthcare. UK Covid Inquiry. Jun 2024. <https://covid19.public-inquiry.uk/every-story-matters>

This article is made freely available for personal use in accordance with BMJ's website terms and conditions for the duration of the covid-19 pandemic or until otherwise determined by BMJ. You may download and print the article for any lawful, non-commercial purpose (including text and data mining) provided that all copyright notices and trade marks are retained.