

COVID-19 & Healthcare Workers: Heroes or Villains?

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Part 2 of 3-part series exploring the relationship between and among healthcare workers, society, patients, and the impact of COVID-19 on the delivery of healthcare services.

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed unprecedented pressures on healthcare systems and healthcare professionals. Societies have responded in conflicting and contradictory ways resulting in healthcare workers to become the targets of a range of emotion from adulation to hatred. What impact have these responses had on healthcare professionals and the organizations for which they work?

Healthcare Professionals as Heroes

People around the world are expressing their appreciation to healthcare professionals for the work that they are doing. Social media pages for hospitals and clinics are filled with messages of gratitude, examples of courage, wonderful stories, and other positive sentiments. Hospitals and clinics are inviting these messages and have created programs to celebrate Healthcare Heroes. Websites have sprung up celebrating “our heroes”.ⁱ Few people are asking doctors, nurses, and other healthcare professionals how they think and feel about being called “heroes”. Formal research seems to have left this question unexamined; however, there are interesting responses from healthcare professionals themselves.



Social media, marketing & branding

Everyone likes to be thanked for doing a good job. Humans appreciate being acknowledged and praised for their contributions. Many people simply derive their own satisfaction from a job well done. Healthcare professionals, in particular, are drawn to their work because they want to help people. Social media is filled with these messages.

Hospitals are offering more specific channels for people to express their feelings. For example, Emerson Hospital in Concord, Massachusetts provides a “Share your Message of Support” under its COVID-19 resourcesⁱⁱ page. While the hospital refrains from referring to its team as heroes, some messages do.

Thank you to our Healthcare Heroes! We cannot beat this horrible virus without your love and support. Please continue to be our guiding light during this unprecedented time. You are so greatly appreciated. Thank you! — Jessica D.

Many do not.

Thank you for supporting our families during this pandemic. Many may not fully comprehend the sacrifices being made both personally and professionally. The gift of life is precious and we thank you for your compassion, commitment to others and support you have provided during the pandemic. I hope that every evening, you take the time out to praise your individual accomplishments. My family is praying for you during these times. Thank you from the bottom of our hearts. — Theresa M.

Hospitals have created “hero” programs. Ochsner Health with hospitals in Louisiana has created an “Ochsner Heroes” campaign celebrating the work of individual employees for their contribution to the care of patients. Members of the community are invited to “share messages of encouragement, videos, and photos”.ⁱⁱⁱ



Do these messages and programs resonate with employees? Research about similar “employee of the month programs” show that they have little impact on performance and some even have a detrimental effect.^{iv} Perhaps the programs

benefit members of the public who have an outlet for their remarks. These programs are certainly part of the marketing and branding of organizations which contribute to the overall impression of the organization as one that values and appreciates its employees.

These social media channels and programs do not answer the question: Do healthcare workers want to be called heroes?

Do healthcare workers want to be called “heroes”?

This topic has been the subject of articles and opinion pieces over the past few months written by healthcare providers themselves. Their perspectives are personal and heartfelt. Some healthcare professionals simply do not want to be “heroes”.



Here is what one New York City first year resident has to say about being called a hero. “At first, as a first-year resident in internal medicine, I felt joy and appreciation.... But a part of the narrative soon began to disturb me. Lionizing slogans— “Health Care Heroes,” “Thank you for risking your life for us,” “Salute our brave soldiers”—are becoming popular at a time when conditions for health care workers are worsening by the day. When our society’s appreciation for health care workers swells into a kind of hero-worship, it becomes too easy to avoid confronting the structural failures that have been exposed by this pandemic.”^v

Another opinion written by Anna Wexler, a bioethicist, echoes the theme of the prior comment, “The problem with the hero narrative is that it emphasizes “bravery” for those who work under hazardous conditions — rather than outrage over the continued existence of such conditions, circumstances that are a direct result of the failed responses by federal and state governments, as well as hospitals. The hero narrative leaves little room for seeing health workers as victims whose suffering is clearly evident now — with high rates of COVID-19 infection abundant around the world.”^{vi}

Dr. Wexler goes on to state, “The hero narrative helps maintain the notion that there will always be an endless stream of do-gooder health care workers who will selflessly fall on the grenade for the greater

good — no matter how poorly they are treated. But health care workers are people, and people have personal risk limits; if hospitals continue to retaliate against their workers, if governments continue to fail to protect them, the sharper these limits will come into focus”.

This emerging theme of using the word “hero” to obscure the shortcomings and failures of the US healthcare response to this pandemic is echoed in the United Kingdom. A May 27th article in UK newspaper The Guardian, entitled “Why we shouldn't be calling our healthcare workers 'heroes'” continues this theme, stating, “The danger of using the language of heroism is that it mutes critique and debate: heroes aren't supposed to complain, or speak out about inadequate protective equipment or lack of testing capacity, or to point out what damage years of austerity have done to healthcare provision in the UK.... We shouldn't expect heroism from healthcare workers, we should expect professionalism in a context of an adequately resourced, well-run service. As the Edinburgh GP says: “People do the job because of a sense of vocation and professionalism – not out of some heroic sense of sacrifice – and they want to be kept as safe as they possibly can.”^{vii}

Healthcare workers in Italy, a country that suffered terribly at the beginning of the pandemic, speak bitterly about how quickly the public has gone from calling them heroes to forgetting the essential role they played in saving lives.



Some 70% of health workers dealing with Covid-19 in Italy's hardest-hit areas are suffering from burnout, a recent study shows. "This is actually the hardest moment for doctors and nurses," says Serena Barello, the author of the study. When we deal with a crisis, our body produces hormones that help us handle stress. "But when you finally have time to reflect on what happened, and society is moving on, it can all come crushing down and you feel more exhausted and emotionally distressed," says Dr Barello.^{viii}

An Italian nurse opines, “Around the world, frontline doctors and nurses are being hailed as heroes for risking their lives to treat patients. But in Italy, this love is ebbing away. ‘When they were scared of dying, suddenly we all became heroes but they've already forgotten us,’ say’s Monica.”^{ix}

At least 163 doctors and 40 nurses died from Covid-19 in Italy. Four of them took their own lives. And yet, many health workers now feel that it is almost as if this pandemic never happened. ‘I feel overwhelmed with anger,’ says Elisa Nanino, a doctor who dealt with Covid-19 in care homes. Since the lockdown has been lifted, she constantly sees people drinking and eating together with no face masks and no social distancing. ‘I want to go up to them and scream in their face, tell them they're putting everyone in danger,’ she says. ‘It's so disrespectful to me and all my colleagues.’^x

Based on these articles and opinions and others like them, it seems clear that instead of being called “heroes”, healthcare workers want to do their jobs professionally in a safe, adequately financed and staffed system, with support systems for them to cope with the burnout, stress, physical, emotion, and mental damage that COVID-19 has exposed.

Healthcare workers as villains

In the United States, violence against healthcare workers in the workplace was on the rise before COVID-19 hit.^{xi} Increased violence prior to COVID was not limited to the United States but experienced globally.^{xii} This pandemic has triggered increased violence worldwide, taken it outside the workplace and into the streets.

Some of the triggers setting off increased violence include fear of contagion, misinformation, frustration, inability to pay medical bills, corruption, lack of trust, and poor or absent security. Physical attacks may include verbal abuse, intentional coughing or spitting.^{xiii}

Wearing scrubs outside the healthcare setting is a visual cue that is putting targets on the backs of healthcare workers.

In Mexico City, a senior nurse went on national television to plead with the public “stop assaulting us”.^{xiv} A nurse in the Philippines was doused with bleach, blinding him. Medical workers in India were chased by a mob throwing stones. A nurse and her children were evicted from their apartment in Pakistan.^{xv}



This May 4th article, “Heroes at Work; an ‘Enemy’ Outside. What It’s like to Be a Healthcare Worker Right Now”, shares the stories of five healthcare professionals in the Boston area. They do not wear scrubs outside the workplace. Some do not tell people that they work in healthcare. All of them are sad and afraid. “They describe being treated like lepers at grocery stores, facing icy treatment from neighbors, or finding it difficult to relate even to close friends and romantic partners. Some said they’ve never felt more isolated. Most said that for the first time in their careers, they’ve stopped wearing scrubs in public for fear of inciting panic, or worse.”



In the United States, the political situation has pitted healthcare workers against individuals who blame them for closing down the economy or impinging on freedom. Protestors who believe that mandating the wearing of masks violates some constitutional right have faced off against healthcare workers who see the damage done by COVID-19 every day and want masks worn to protect the public.

Healthcare workers also include public health officials on the national and local level. Death threats and violence have now become the “new normal” for individuals working for the public interest. Dr. Anthony Fauci, a key figure in the US national response and the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has received death threats accusing him of contradicting the president and politicizing his response to the pandemic. He now requires a personal security detail.^{xvi}

Dr. Barbara Ferrer, the director of the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, disclosed that she faced repeated threats to her safety. “The death threats started last month, during a Covid-19 Facebook Live public briefing when someone very casually suggested that I should be shot,” Dr. Ferrer said in a statement. “I didn’t immediately see the message, but my husband did, my children did, and so

did my colleagues. It is deeply worrisome,” she added, “to imagine that our hardworking infectious disease physicians, nurses, epidemiologists and environmental health specialists or any of our other team members would have to face this level of hatred.”^{xvii}

Some healthcare professionals are resigning or taking early retirement. Many are questioning whether they want to remain in their jobs. The implications for the future of healthcare services are clear – no one wants death threats, violence, and hatred as part of the new normal work environment.

Healthcare Professionals are Human Beings

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed healthcare workers at the center of issues that no one could have imagined – a dangerous new disease; shortages of PPEs; healthcare systems in distress; physical, emotional, & mental stress; physical and verbal attacks; political issues; and more. They are neither heroes nor villains, simply human beings caught in a terrible situation. What comes next for these individuals, the organizations for which they work, and the governments where they are located? The lessons to be learned are incredibly important.

- Will healthcare systems fix the problems that created shortages, unsafe work environments, and lack of services to help with the physical, emotional, and mental impact of the crisis?
- Will healthcare workers leave their chosen professions?
- Will these events influence the next generation of healthcare workers for accepting the challenge or selecting other professions?

The answers to these and other questions must be found if healthcare services and healthcare professionals are going to recover, improve, and thrive in the future so that when the next pandemic hits, the world is prepared.

About the Author:

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ⁱⁱ <https://www.emersonhospital.org/coronavirus-covid-19-resources/share-your-message-of-support>, accessed 17 June 2020

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.ochsner.org/ochsnerheroes/p3>, accessed 17 June 2020.

^{iv} <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01608061.2010.520144>, accessed 17 June 2020

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^{vi} Wexler A. The trouble with calling health care workers ‘heroes’. The Boston Globe.10 April 2020.

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viii <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52784120>, accessed 17 June 2020

ix Ibid.

xx Ibid

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xii <https://www.economist.com/international/2020/05/11/health-workers-become-unexpected-targets-during-covid-19>, accessed 17 June 2020

xiii Ibid.

xiv <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/27/world/americas/coronavirus-health-workers-attacked.html>, accessed 17 June 2020

xv Ibid.

xvi <https://theconversation.com/healthcare-workers-are-still-coming-under-attack-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic-136573>, accessed 17 June 2020

xvii <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/22/us/coronavirus-health-officials.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage>, accessed 23 June 2020