

PRINT-Distress among health care providers surges

After a brief reprieve in the summer, followed by a delta variant COVID-19 surge that lessened mid-fall, now Omicron threatens to test the limits of health care workers at OSF HealthCare and at health systems across the country. In Illinois, Omicron infections are doubling every two or three days and in Michigan where OSF HealthCare operates a hospital and medical clinic, they are preparing for a storm of infections.

A new study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says people without a vaccine are 10 times more likely to get COVID-19 and 20 times more likely to die from it. Those are scary statistics given the fact only 61.6% of the U.S. population is vaccinated and people are traveling to visit family for the holidays.

What's different from a year ago? There are fewer providers to care for sick and hospitalized patients. The continuing surges of high patient volumes in the past 12 months has led to 1 in 5 medical professionals leaving their field for other careers or retiring early.

Dr. Sam Sears, director of Behavioral Health Physician Services for OSF HealthCare says the stress of making difficult daily decisions, coupled with longer hours and concerns about personal health, have made for challenges beyond what many envisioned when they chose their career.

"Being asked to legitimately put their own health and safety and those of their loved ones on the line every day to try and help others out, that is ultimately as health care providers what we signed up to do. But I don't know that most individuals had really ever dealt with the impact directly and personally in the same manner as they're having to see it every single day," he observed.

Dr. Sears says burnout was a problem before the pandemic and the unrealized promise of returning to some sort of normalcy has made feelings of exhaustion and frustration worse, especially when a good percentage of the population refuses to get vaccinated and boosted.

According to Dr. Sears, "Burnout is really more trauma, clinical depression and anxiety features than just pure fatigue and being run down and difficulty motivating one's self, into realms that it really does approach 'we need to have this person clinically addressed to help this person recover their resiliency and their ability to function.'"

Even though small gatherings of fully vaccinated people are ok, Dr. Sears says he's concerned pandemic fatigue will result in people not wearing a mask or keep six feet apart during last-minute shopping or in other larger public events such as Christmas concerts and church services.

Sears points out, it can be excruciatingly hard on health care workers who feel like every day nobody's listening, nobody's following the rules, nothing's changed and the numbers are going in the wrong direction.

"Our health care workers are not robots. These are real human beings dealing with their own emotional stresses and struggles that you're compounding with the emotional stress and struggles of what they're doing day in, day out – making many, many life and death decisions for individuals and that becomes very challenging and stressful," he points out.

Dr. Sears admits some health care workers see taking care of themselves and getting behavioral health support as just one more thing they don't have time to do. However, he tells those care providers, it's part of their job to make sure they are physically and mentally fit.

"It really is an ethical directive at the end of the day for people to take of themselves when they are caring for others because, otherwise, they're not going to be able to sustain that; keep that up to sustain the level of care that others need."

Providing Support for Health Care Workers

[OSF Silver Cloud](#) is an online behavioral tool available 24/7 for community members but there is a special section tailored specifically for health care workers. For the public, the free app offers a COVID-19-specific module. It is also backed by a behavioral health navigator who can help direct people who need in-person care. But, Sears says the pandemic has highlighted for the public, flaws in the mental health infrastructure across the country, especially for health care workers themselves.

"As both a health care system and as the greater United States, we're really going to have to think about how do we really meet these needs across the country and locally to help the people who have been helping us get through all of this?"

Dr. Sears suggests gestures of kindness from the community and even 'thank you' cards go a long way in providing emotional support for health care workers.

Additionally, the vaccines and booster shots offer the only hope of an endpoint to the pandemic. In the meantime, Dr. Sears says people need to be an emotional support for those they know, and even those who are not within their tightest circle such as extended family or older relatives living alone or in nursing homes.

“Everyone’s going to be conscripted into kind of being some level of behavioral health support for people because there’s not enough therapists, psychiatrists, APNs, primary care doctors to go around for the need that’s really going to be there, so we’ll lean on each other as we just march through and keep as many people going as we can,” Dr. Sears explained.

Some communities are adding mental health 4-1-1 classes to help residents understand and move past the stigma connected with mental health issues, along with educating people to recognize symptoms of someone in mental distress, how to talk with them, and to suggest resources.

An OSF Behavioral Health navigator can be reached at during business hours at (833) 713-7100. For 24/7 support, calling 2-1-1 can also provide direct help for a variety of needs, including mental health crisis support. Immediate help is also available through the National Suicide Prevention hotline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).