

Nurses awareness on Covid-19 limited, survey finds

While the majority of medical practitioners are confident of their knowledge of Covid-19, nurses have expressed inferior awareness of the virus, a survey has revealed.



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Two in five healthcare workers, responding to a survey by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), said they did not know the correct Covid-19 incubation period.

The report, which the HSRC did in partnership with the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Nelson R. Mandela School of Medicine, was released on Thursday. The survey assessed the impact of Covid-19 on health workers.

Three in four of all professional categories, reveals the survey, correctly identified contact with contaminated surfaces as a mode of transmission, while two in five of all professional categories incorrectly identified Covid-19 as being airborne.

However, knowledge of the correct symptoms is high at the time of data collection.

Meanwhile, participants had a significantly high self-perceived risk of contracting Covid-19 across all the provinces, while the high-risk perception was highest in the North West (71.3%) and Free State (70.1%) and lowest in the Western Cape

(53.2%) and Gauteng (54.6%).

The study was carried out between 11 April 2020 and 7 May 2020 and 7,607 healthcare professionals participated.

Of those, 78.2% of the sample were female; nurse practitioners comprised 36.7% of the sample, other health care professionals 34.7% and medical practitioners 28.7%.

Just 49.4% of participants worked in the public health sector while 32.1% of them were in the private sector. A mere 2.5% worked in both the public and private sectors.

Nearly half of nurse practitioners were extremely concerned about family members and personal health.

The survey also found that two in five health professionals have extreme concern for their family wellbeing, while one in five health professionals have extreme concern for their well-being.

“Three in five nurse practitioners were concerned about passing the infection to family members.”

In addition, three-quarters of health professionals believed that their occupation placed them at higher risk, while over half felt they did not have adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) which put them in danger.

Priscilla Reddy, extraordinary professor at the HSRC, said health workers are another group of very important foot soldiers in the face of the pandemic.

“They’re the most important people in the response to Covid-19, infrastructure is one important part. But the frontline workers, health workers, nurses, doctors and all other health workers are important.”

Meanwhile, the research has shown the spotlight on the nurses who form 65% of the healthcare workforce in South Africa of which the majority are women.

Reddy said they are several concerns such as the fact that the knowledge was not as high as it should have been.

“But I think the most important findings are at a personal level and how they perceive themselves at risk or didn’t perceive themselves at risk,” she said.

“Therefore, it affected their health and well-being. In the same context, the issue of healthcare workers taking infections from wherever they are working and back to the family.”

According to Reddy, risk perception is an important concept from different angles.

“If a person perceives them at risk, whether it’s high, medium, moderate or low risk, it’s for a reason,” she explained.

“If you understand the disease, if you have good knowledge of the disease, then you’ll know exactly what to do to prevent the risk. Because it’s taking that risk that’s going to infect you.”

However, if you grasp the infection control procedures and have a good knowledge of it and able to do it, you will perceive yourself as lower risk, she added.

“What shocked me, which is not on our data, is the number of healthcare workers who have become infected and that’s the hard part and how they’re going to heal from it.”

Globally, more than 90,000 healthcare workers are thought to be infected with Covid-19 and more than 600 deaths have been recorded.

Back at home, 24,000 healthcare workers have been infected with at least 100 losing their lives to the coronavirus, according to the Health Department's latest statistics.

"One thing that surprised me is people's willingness to work as healthcare workers despite the fact that they were so many obstacles. I think it showed goodwill on the part of healthcare workers," she added.

Reddy said the communicating the correct information is a very important strategy going forward.

Also, Reddy said they are recommending workplace support, community support, creating a central database for healthcare workers, creating surveillances systems to gain an in-depth understanding into the determinants of their behaviour and practices and rigorous continuing focused in-service and medical education training and sharing experiences.

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