

## A call to action: Promoting mental wellbeing in South African healthcare workers

**To the Editor:** Healthcare workers are exposed to significant occupational stress.<sup>[1-4]</sup> Systematic reviews suggest that organisational as well as individual interventions may help to reduce burnout and build resilience.<sup>[5-7]</sup> There is emerging evidence of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the wellbeing of frontline workers.<sup>[8,9]</sup> Literature reviewing the impact of previous emergencies has highlighted the need for a proactive approach to promoting mental wellbeing and preventing mental ill-health.<sup>[10-13]</sup> Current evidence suggests that a trauma-informed model with psychological first aid as the initial intervention is beneficial,<sup>[14-16]</sup> with an emphasis on compassionate leadership, good self-care, and creating an environment that facilitates access to support and mental health interventions for those who need it.<sup>[17]</sup> The aim is to build and sustain resilience. These measures need to be continuous throughout all phases of the pandemic.

While South Africa (SA) had some time to prepare for the pandemic, anticipatory anxiety and other heightened emotional states were initially evident among healthcare workers.<sup>[18]</sup> Now, as COVID-19 caseloads and healthcare worker infections increase, we can expect that ongoing unremitting stress will increase the risk of distress, burnout and moral injury, as well as specific psychiatric disorders.

A national initiative, the Healthcare Worker Care Network, was launched on 3 June. This initiative is a partnership between South African Depression and Anxiety Group, the South African Medical Association (SAMA), the South African Society of Psychiatrists and the South African Society of Anaesthesiologists, and is supported by the Psychological Association of South Africa. The project has taken a two-pronged approach:

- The first prong is preventive and has involved training leaders in effective proactive measures to improve staff wellbeing. As of 14 July 2020, 1 035 people had attended these sessions.
- The second prong is the provision of counselling. As of 14 July, 592 mental health professionals nationally had volunteered to assist with this. Requests for help can be made in a secure and confidential manner through the SAMA website, the Vula or EMG applications, a dedicated helpline (0800212121), or the project website (<https://www.healthcareworkerscarenetwork.org.za>).

The anticipated impact of the pandemic on the wellbeing of healthcare workers is likely to be an added burden on an already stressed population.<sup>[19,20]</sup> We should be doing everything we can to mitigate this and to build resilience in our frontline workers.

More than ever, leadership needs to be clear, informative, and supportive. More than ever, frontline workers need to practise good self-care for the benefit of their patients, their families and themselves.

This is an opportunity to build a more compassionate and healthy healthcare system. So, the call to action is to:

- Leaders in the SA healthcare system: Do all you can to create an enabling environment for healthcare workers to provide clinical

care in this difficult time, learn how to support your teams, develop compassionate leadership skills, and practise good self-care yourselves.

- Individual healthcare workers and other workers in the frontline: Pace yourselves, develop healthy self-care strategies, and have the courage to reach out for help. It is available.
- Psychiatrists, psychologists and other allied health professionals: Join this effort to make a difference and play a valuable role in the pandemic and beyond.

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