

Challenges and opportunities for nurses during COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Background: Pandemic of COVID-19 coincided with the year of Nurses and Midwives 2020. In war against invisible that has been ongoing during this pandemic, nurses play crucial role. As of June 2020, more than 600 nurses have lost their lives due to COVID-19. Nursing practice takes patients' safety at paramount through continuum of testing, quarantine and isolation. Thus, there is need to review challenges that pandemic has posed as well as the avenues of opportunities that it has opened for nurses.

Method: Review of existing literature on nurses, their challenges and opportunities during COVID-19 was done using electronic database. Freely accessible literatures in English language that clearly mentioned on challenges and opportunities of nurses during COVID-19 were included in the study.

Result: One of the challenges that nurses face during COVID-19 is workforce shortage. With increasing number of people infected with COVID-19, it outstretches the existing nursing health workforce, and disproportionately in the low and middle incomes countries. They are at risk of infection and have high job demand. The incidents of suicide among nurses are representation of physical distress and psychological trauma. Role of nurses in patients care during COVID-19 can be under-rated and stigmatized. Internationally trained nurses and minorities nurses are at increased risk of discrimination. Despite these challenges, COVID-19 puts forward opportunities for nurses on implementing humanistic theory in practice, self-esteem and sharing of real time stories, contingency management and creativity. It opens platform for leading infection prevention measures and advocacy of profession.

Conclusion: Being the pertinent stakeholders in patient care, nurses' faces different challenges as well as some opportunities. COVID-19 has opened avenues for advocacy of nursing profession to get acknowledged for their dedication, perseverance, high morale and contribution during the pandemic management.

Keywords: Challenges of Nurses, COVID-19 Pandemic, Nurses, Opportunities of Nurses

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INTRODUCTION

The world today is set in a war against the invisible with all of its efforts of science and technology. It is in the race of possible vaccine development against the SARS-CoV-2 that has caused the pandemic of COVID-19. Public health and social measures like- travel restrictions, physical distancing to proper use of mask, hand hygiene and respiratory hygiene are being implemented globally to flatten the curve of the pandemic. At the same time, there are teams of health care providers for whom the rush has been more than ever before. The nurses make up the largest part of professional health workforce.¹Nursing, the profession that links with lady with the lamp, has been guided by footprints of Nightingale and continued developing from environment theory of hers.²World Health Organization marked 200th birthday of Florence Nightingale by celebrating year 2020 as the year of Nurses and Midwives. This coincided with COVID-19 pandemic; remarking high time to realize the crucial role of the nurses in health care team. The slogan of International Nurses Day on May 12, 2020, "Nurses: A Voice to Lead – Nursing the World to Health" has so much to put together amid COVID-19 pandemic that has placed nurses in the role of warriors against the invisible. Since the onset of the disease, it is estimated that as of June 2020, more than 600 nurses lost their lives due to COVID-19 while a central database with the status of the nurses and health care workers during this pandemic is still lacking.³ Nursing practice takes patients' safety at paramount and integral to it throughout the continuum of testing, quarantine and isolation to contain the virus. Thus, there is need to review the challenges that pandemic has posed upon nurses as well as the avenues of opportunities that it has opened.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The review of the existing literature on nurses and COVID-19 pandemic, their challenges and opportunities was done. The search was based on electronic database and the search engine used were Google Scholar, PubMed, Google and the search terms used were "Nurses and COVID-19", "Challenges and COVID-19", "Opportunities and

COVID-19" in different combinations. The Boolean operator AND and OR, and quotation marks were used to refine search of literature. The literature that clearly mentioned on the challenges and opportunities of nurses during COVID-19 and their references were retrieved.

Inclusion criteria: The literatures that mentioned about challenges and/or opportunities for nurses and COVID-19 pandemic were included in the study.

Exclusion criteria: The literatures that mentioned in general about health care workers but not specific to nurses were excluded. The literatures in other than English language and/or requiring fees for retrieval were excluded in the study.

RESULT

Challenges of Nurses during COVID-19

Shortage of workforce

It was forecasted that there will be shortage of approximately 7.61 million nurses and midwives globally in 2030. And migrating nurses mainly from low and middle income countries are one of the major source of fulfillment of the need of high income countries.^{1,4,5} With this background, the increasing number of the people infected with COVID-19 will outstretch the existing nursing health workforce disproportionately in the low and middle incomes countries most of which are yet to reach the peak of the pandemic.

High job demand and risk of infection

During the pandemic, nurses involved in direct care of the patients with COVID-19 with personal protective equipment (PPEs) are partners of patient care. Nurses are put into a high job demand and heavy workload with comprehensive assessment and continuous monitoring of the patient status that can sink without any prior signals. This takes hours long close contact with the patients and longer exposure than other counterpart health care workers. The undue pressure of being at risk of infection hovers around as the job demands fulfilling the basic needs of the patients closely. They also become companion of the patients in isolation who otherwise would have no one to ventilate their faith and fear of the disease. The share of the PPEs being not enough to cover the need of nursing to

the COVID-19 patients puts the nurses at the risk of infection leaving them with the fear of cross infections among their families and other patients.⁶

Physical distress and psychological trauma

The need of saving personal protective gears as they run short; makes the nurses stay in the gears throughout the shifts in the isolation wards. The skin lesions of nurses due to the prolonged use of PPEs are the overt findings of the intense physical distress and psychological trauma that they may need to go through in the gears with no food, no water, and diapers to hold the urine for them.⁶⁻⁸ The incident of the nurse, from Italy, 34 years old female, working for COVID-19 care, who committed suicide on knowing to have caught COVID-19 and left with her a note that, she was scared to transmit it to the ones she cared; is one of the representation of such distress, compassion fatigue and psychological trauma.⁹

Under-rated contribution and risk of stigmatization

Nurses are involved in care for the COVID-19 patients in the absence of the relatives or care takers near the bedside. They get involved more in observation of the patients' response to treatment and less in decision making for the line of patients' treatment. With everyone in crisis mode, there are ample chances of under-rating the contributions that nurses make in the patient treatment, recovery and prevention of the disease.^{10,11} Additionally, nurses have been stigmatized as the spreaders of the infections in the community leading to the incidents of violence, landlord's eviction against them. Not limited to the community but amongst the colleagues, the families of nurses involved in COVID-19 care are at risk of being stigmatized further.¹²⁻¹⁵

Risk for increased discrimination of internationally educated nurses and minorities nurses

The discriminations of internationally educated nurses were evident even prior to the pandemic. During the pandemic, the discriminating policies of compensation and hazard allowances for the migrant nurses and disproportionate effect of COVID-19 among the minorities in high income

countries, push them into further risk of discrimination during the pandemic. Along with this there are paradoxical unpaid leaves and pay cuts with reduced staffing in routine services as well.¹⁶⁻²⁰

Opportunities of Nurses during COVID-19 Implementing humanistic theory in practice

By the nature of the responsibility that nurses are majorly assigned, they are among the health care professionals who are the first to attend the patients; have the longest hours of exposure to the patient and spend the closest time with them supporting their needs of daily life activities from all level of Maslow Hierarchy of needs.²¹ Being infectious disease with a spectrum of illness, today the patients of COVID-19 in isolation at health facility set up rely among the nurses from general ward to the intensive care unit in order to meet the health needs, emotional and psychological needs and the activities of daily living- cleanliness to nutrition. Nursing amid COVID-19 pandemic is more like the one defined by the humanistic theory that puts forward nursing as an experience lived between human beings and this experience affects the existence of the human beings.²² When being recruited with the Florence pledge to serve in the profession of nursing, the high humane spirit is the one that keeps them working irrespective of the threat of the infection and it is their ethical commitment that keeps thing moving from their ends.^{23,24} The reflections of nurses working during COVID-19 to have increased their will, self discovery of potential and increased courage to face life are remarkable to see.²⁵

Self-esteem and sharing of real time stories

The nurses share in the saddest and the happiest moments of the people amid pandemic. Nurses are being a hand to help and lend their ears to silently listen the sentiments of the patients who cannot see their families due to the contagion. Nurses in health facility set up are deeply engaged with the patients with COVID-19 like making the smallest observations to detecting the patients' response to the therapy, positioning of an intubated patient for better results and measures to avoid bed sores in a bed ridden patient.²⁶⁻²⁸ These activities undertaken to improve patients' health increases the sense of

worth and high self esteem.²³⁻²⁷ It is indeed the opportunity that is received amid pandemic due to the profession of nursing which broadens the reasons of satisfaction irrespective of the physical and mental difficulties being faced; with care of the COVID-19 patient. Bringing these first-hand knowledge and experience of the reality of caring to the patients, their families, friends and public through writing, institutionalize these moments and create environment for better support.^{29,30}

Contingency management and creativity

During the pandemic, evidence of taking the turn from stereotypical nursing department role to contingency plans like- initiation of epidemic prevention and control early warning, and reasonable allocation of treatment and nursing human resources, setting up special groups for continuous work of epidemic prevention and control, workflow optimization of patient admission, referral, and transfer, optimization of the online pre-screening triage process for fever clinics and successful management of COVID-19 cases, shows that there is need of preparing the nurses for the comprehensive emergency plans and standardizing the nurses role during such contingency.³¹ The preparation of the nurses needs to be rehearsed and improved as needs change with the type of crisis. Also, there are existing innovations and creativity like nurse owned clinics in Africa, village 'wise women' in Central Asia and nurse specialists in the UK to promote potential of nurses.¹ The pandemic is opening up the channels for letting nurses reach their optimum potentials with similar creativity in their roles ranging from being companion of the COVID-19 cases to advocacy in minimizing cross infection and educating the community to minimize the stigma.

Leading infection prevention and control

Amid COVID-19 pandemic, measures of infection prevention and control (IPC) have been much common to appear in the literatures and even in the social media. The health workers demand to be well equipped at least with personal protective gears when they are risking themselves in care of the patients with COVID-19. And study reveals that the well geared health personnel were not tested positive with COVID-19.³² With this

background, nurses can take this opportunity to lead the IPC measures in their health facilities. Being the most populous among all other health professionals and most proximal to the patient care, they can have a check even on the simplest measures like washing hands before patient encounter, ensuring minimized cross infections, effective screening and triage practices at the first encounter of the patient in health facility, planning of the logistics for proper IPC measures both during routine care and crisis.

Opening avenues for advocacy of nursing profession

The existing evidences show that a professional needs to know not only on what needs to be done but also how to get it done within the health system.³³ And the crisis opens up the avenues on need of preparing the nurses as part of longer term nursing education to be in action during such future emergencies.³⁴ Also having majority of women in the profession, it gives an opportunity to advocate for gender equality with increased investment in nursing profession and creating enabling practice environment.^{1,35,36} Thus, the nurse advocates can work on measurement of nursing specific and nursing sensitive outcomes to further strengthen the evidences of nurses' contribution in health outcomes and health system strengthening.

CONCLUSION

Providing sustained and comprehensive support to nurses is necessary in improving their physical and mental health and preparing the enabling environment for the prevention and control of COVID-19 pandemic. Being the pertinent stakeholders in patient care during COVID-19, nurses are challenged with shortage of workforce, physical distress and psychological trauma, under-rated contribution and risk of stigmatization and discrimination of internationally educated nurses and minorities nurses. However, they are equally left with the opportunities like implementing humanistic theory in practice, self esteem and sharing real time stories, contingency management and creativity, leading infection prevention and control. There are opening avenues for advocacy of nursing profession to get

acknowledged for their dedication, perseverance and high morale to contribute in this pandemic management. Leaders in nursing should bring forward the ways to tackle challenges and enable

opportunities for empowering nurses in overall management of COVID-19.

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