

While U.S. Nurses Fight COVID-19 in Hospitals They Also Fight Burnout

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While recently conducting research for the Journal of Health Care Finance, I reached out to multiple state nursing associations with high COVID-19 positivity rates. The Journal's Editor and I wanted to find out what was going on at the state level regarding nurses caring for patients with COVID-19. After reaching out, I was able to speak with representatives from Illinois, California, New York, and Texas. We conducted two in-depth audio interviews, one with the executive director of the ANA: New York Chapter, Jeanine Santelli, and one with Dr. Erin Perez, an advanced practice nurse practitioner and key player within the Texas Nurses Association.

In the interviews conducted, I found the common themes of nurses and healthcare workers joining together to help where they could as well as taking care of the nurses mentally and physically. While the topic of both interviews was focused on burnout, the representatives for New York and Texas were both impressed by how much strength the nurses had, despite working through the risk of potential burnout. The New York Nurses Association had nurses from upstate New York, as well as from across the country, traveling to the more affected areas of the state to provide some assistance to the hospitals that had many COVID-19 patients. With respect to Texas, Dr. Perez informed us that once COVID-19 broke out across the U.S, colleagues of hers volunteered to be sent to hot spots like New York and California to assist where they might be needed, at a point in time when Texas did not have as many acute patients.

The American Nurses Association ended up writing about many of those volunteers, noting the work they did across the country to help alleviate some of the stress and pressure that the Coronavirus has out on hospitals and their employees. Both the New York Chapter and the Texas Chapter emphasized the importance of nurses taking care of themselves and provided positive messages to their nurse members. While these two states are in different regions, both experienced aid from nurses throughout the country, as well as support from their own organizations, to help prevent burnout.

Erin Perez is a palliative care nurse practitioner at University Hospital San Antonio and has been working throughout the pandemic. At first, Texas did not have a high volume of cases, but during July of 2020 the state had a significant increase in COVID-19 cases.

Perez recounts: "About six to eight weeks ago we started seeing higher and higher volumes. We needed help and we were asking for people, specifically nurses -- registered nurses, advanced practice nurses -- to please come and help us because we have high volume needs, whether it was on a step-down unit for acute care, E.R., intensive care unit especially, and everywhere in between," said Perez.

At her hospital, they were able to receive assistance from the Department of Defense's nurses, FEMA nurses and contracted nurses. While these nurses were all from different departments or organizations, Dr. Perez says that she couldn't tell who was who and did not feel a need to investigate that. Instead, it was clear to her that all of the nurses were prepared for this virus because critical thinking had been ingrained into them throughout their nursing education.

This said, while the nurses had been prepared from their education, there was still shock at the symptom burden on the patients and the high death rates caused by the virus.

Nurses like Dr. Perez have been working since the start of the pandemic in the United States back in March. She noted that normally she and the other health care workers at her hospital thrive on touch and comradery but because of the pandemic, they haven't been able to celebrate or console each other through touch.

"I can remember the first COVID patient that we lost in our institution back in march and the tears in everybody's eyes because you can't see their face," said Dr. Perez. To console each other, they would take a moment to remember the life that was lost, and then they would have to move on to go help the other patients in need. Since the nurses cannot physically celebrate, they have found creative ways to uplift each other, whether it be through little dances or inspirational quotes posted throughout the hospital. The nurses and health care workers on the front lines of the pandemic have been working tirelessly to take care of the patients in need, but they also found that self-care is really important to help them keep going.

For Erin Perez, self-care has consisted of taking care of herself emotionally, spiritually, and physically. At the beginning of the pandemic, she says they would only get hydration, sleep, and some food here or there, but because it started to take a toll, she has now devoted more time to self-care. During the two days a week she has off, Dr. Perez spends her time with family, going outdoors, ensuring that she is hydrated, has adequate nutrition, has enough rest and being with her horse.

While everyone has their version of self-care, she has made a point of asking colleagues 'are you ok? Have you eaten? Have you taken a moment?' to make sure they are taking care of themselves as well as the patients.

"We are so fixated on the physical PPE, but I also encourage people to think '*what are we doing for our mental health PPE??*' and I've encouraged our leaders in our hospital to make sure that all nurses, regardless of the role they play in this pandemic, have appropriate mental health PPE," she said.

As we've seen across the country, nurses are experiencing burnout due to long shifts and the emotional toll this virus takes on everyone. Dr. Perez notes that it's important to recognize that not every nurse is verbal about saying they are not ok and that more people need to be attuned to that fact and need to sometimes take the initiative to provide someone with the help they may need. Her point is that for everyone self-care may be different, but it is important to take care of oneself during this time and help others that may need help as well.

Speaking as part of a panel discussion on August 6th, Dr. Perez mentioned having a "mental health PPE toolkit" for the health care workers dealing with the stress of COVID-19. I asked what she might include in a mental health PPE toolkit for the nurses. She would encourage nurse leaders to come together with different hospital departments to come up with a plan to help the nurses emotionally and mentally that best fits their facility. Every hospital is different than the next, but hospitals should have some sort of resources in place to best assist their nurses year-round, especially now when they are experiencing high casualties and emotional stress because of COVID-19.

On the American Nurses Association website, there is a link to a COVID-19 resource page filled with news and updates for their nurses about the virus, as well as a tribute to fallen nurses. Each state nurses association has their own website. Specifically, on the Texas Nurses Association website, there are links and resources for the nurses themselves about care for the caregiver, webinars, news updates, and various kinds of help for nurses during this time.

While the nurses are working their hardest to keep their patients alive, they can experience burnout from overworking and not taking care of themselves. Erin Perez herself has not seen a high incidence of burnout. Instead, she has seen nurses banding together and motivating each other to keep going and help one another through this. "I think that's the best thing is if we can educate each other to identify ways to help each other get through the day, and not just survive, but thrive through a pandemic," says Dr. Perez.

I believe that we have seen a fair amount of burnout throughout the country, but I have also seen instances like what Erin Perez describes, where nurses are encouraging each other and celebrating victories as best they can. What became most apparent throughout my correspondence with multiple state nursing associations is that these nurses have done their best to take care of each other and take care of themselves, while still saving a countless number of lives.