


Covid-19 pandemic and the impacts on occupational health and quality of life of professionals working in primary care

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to analyze the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the occupational health and quality of life of professionals working in primary health care. To this end, a literature review was conducted, where it was possible to verify that the Covid-19 pandemic overloaded primary care professionals with an intense workload, exposure to the virus, physical and emotional exhaustion, lack of resources and adequate training,

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in addition to impacts on mental health. Despite the challenges, these professionals have demonstrated unwavering dedication to providing essential care to the population. Rapid adaptation to new working practices and the implementation of safety measures were crucial to ensure the continuity of primary health services. The results highlight the importance of effective measures to protect and support primary care professionals, including the adequate provision of personal protective equipment, access to psychological support and mental health services, continuous training, and recognition of the work of these professionals. In addition, the pandemic has highlighted the need for investments in public health and strengthening of primary care systems to prevent and face future health crises, thus promoting the health and quality of life not only of professionals, but of the entire population served by primary health services.

Keywords: Occupational Health, Quality of Life at Work, Pandemic, Health Professionals, Primary Care.



INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought significant challenges to the occupational health and quality of life of professionals working in primary care. Since the emergence of the new coronavirus, these professionals have faced an intense workload, dealing with the increased demand for health services, the fear of contamination, the shortage of adequate protective equipment, and the emotional burden of dealing with infected patients and severe cases of the disease (LANA et al., 2020).

In the context of primary care, where direct contact with the community is essential, health professionals have faced additional challenges, such as the need to quickly adapt to new care protocols, perform screening and tests for Covid-19, monitor patients in quarantine, and cope with the increase in cases of mental illnesses related to stress and social isolation (CARVALHO et al., 2020).

In addition, the pandemic has exacerbated existing health and social inequalities, disproportionately affecting health professionals who were already in vulnerable situations, such as informal workers, those with precarious contracts, or those who face difficulties in accessing adequate health services (BARBOSA et al., 2021).

Given this scenario, it is essential that effective measures are implemented to protect and support frontline health workers. This includes providing adequate personal protective equipment, ensuring safe working conditions, providing psychological support and access to mental health services, promoting training and continuing education programs, and recognizing the work and effort of these professionals through incentives and appreciation.

This literature review seeks to analyze the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the occupational health and quality of life of professionals working in primary care, identifying the main challenges faced by these professionals, the coping strategies adopted, and the gaps in knowledge that require future research. Through a critical analysis of the existing literature, it is intended to contribute to the development of policies and practices that promote the well-being and safety of these essential workers.

DEVELOPMENT

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The Covid-19 pandemic, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, is one of the most impactful and significant events of the 21st century. Initially identified in the city of Wuhan, China, in December 2019, the virus has spread rapidly around the world, resulting in a global public health crisis that has affected millions of people on all continents (LIMA; DOMINGUES JUNIOR; SILVA, 2024).



The novel coronavirus belongs to the family of coronaviruses, which includes a number of viruses that can cause anything from common colds to more serious illnesses such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). However, SARS-CoV-2 has been shown to be highly contagious and capable of causing a wide range of symptoms, from mild flu to severe forms of pneumonia and respiratory failure (LIMA et al., 2023).

Transmission of the virus occurs primarily through respiratory droplets expelled when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks, and can also occur through contact with contaminated surfaces. The resulting disease, known as Covid-19, can affect people of all ages, but is most severe in older adults and individuals with underlying health conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, and obesity (BITTENCOURT, 2020).

Since the start of the pandemic, healthcare systems around the world have faced unprecedented challenges, including shortages of hospital beds, personal protective equipment (PPE), mechanical ventilators, and medicines. In addition, the burden on health services has led to the postponement of non-urgent medical procedures, cancellation of elective appointments, and challenges in providing health care for conditions other than Covid-19 (ISER et al., 2020).

To contain the spread of the virus, a range of public health measures have been implemented, including social distancing, wearing face masks, hand hygiene, quarantines and lockdowns. However, the effectiveness of these measures has varied according to the population's adherence, government policies, and the capacity of health systems to deal with the crisis (BITTENCOURT, 2020).

In addition to the physical health impacts, the pandemic has also had significant consequences for the mental, economic, and social health of communities around the world. Social isolation, fear of illness, job loss, and uncertainty about the future have contributed to the increase in anxiety, depression, and other mental disorders (LIMA; DOMINGUES JUNIOR; SILVA, 2024).

PRIMARY HEALTH CARE

Primary health care is the first level of care in the health system, and is considered the gateway to health services. It is responsible for providing accessible, continuous, coordinated, and comprehensive primary health care to the population. This means that primary care aims to address the most common and basic health needs of individuals and communities by promoting disease prevention, treatment of common health conditions, and promotion of overall well-being (GAMA et al., 2021).

Primary care services are usually provided by a multidisciplinary team of health professionals, which may include general practitioners, nurses, nursing technicians, community health agents, among others. This team works in basic health units, such as health centers, health



centers, and family health units, and works in an integrated manner with other levels of health care, such as specialized and hospital care (SILVA et al., 2017).

Among the main activities of primary care are: health promotion and disease prevention, through vaccination campaigns, guidance on healthy habits and early detection of diseases; the follow-up of chronic diseases, such as hypertension and diabetes, through regular consultations and monitoring; the care of uncomplicated urgencies and emergencies; the performance of basic examinations and procedures; guidance and referral to other health services when necessary; and the development of community health actions, aiming at the active participation of the population in the promotion of their own health (CORDIOLI et al., 2019).

Primary care is essential to ensure equitable and universal access to health services, contributing to the improvement of health indicators and quality of life of the population (GAMA et al., 2021).

COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE IMPACTS ON PRIMARY CARE HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought with it a series of challenges for health professionals working in primary care. These professionals, including family doctors, nurses, nursing technicians, and community health workers, play a key role on the front lines of the fight against the disease, dealing directly with the population and facing unique conditions during this critical period (LIMA et al., 2020).

One of the main challenges faced by these professionals was exposure to the virus. Working in close contact with infected or suspected patients, they were subject to a higher risk of contagion, often facing this reality with limited protective resources (FABRI et al., 2022).

In addition, the pandemic has burdened these professionals with an increased workload. With the increase in the number of Covid-19 cases, they had to deal not only with the treatment of these patients, but also with maintaining routine care for other health conditions, such as chronic diseases and medical emergencies (BRANDÃO et al., 2021).

Physical and emotional exhaustion has also become a significant concern. The constant fear of contagion, work overload, stressful conditions, and exposure to traumatic situations contributed to high levels of stress, anxiety, and exhaustion among these professionals (GALARÇA et al., 2022).

The lack of resources and adequate training was another challenge faced by the primary care team. Shortages of personal protective equipment, limited access to diagnostic tests, insufficient training in prevention measures, and lack of psychological support were recurrent issues (PINTO et al., 2022).

Faced with these challenges, primary care health professionals have had to adapt to new work practices to ensure the safety of patients and themselves. This included implementing patient triage,



telemedicine, social distancing measures, and educating the community on preventive measures (LIMA; GOMES; BARBOSA, 2020).

Finally, the pandemic has had a significant impact on the mental health of these professionals, leading to symptoms of post-traumatic stress, burnout, depression, and anxiety. Despite all the challenges, the dedication and commitment of these professionals were instrumental in providing essential care to the population during this unprecedented period (LIMA et al., 2020).

FINAL THOUGHTS

In view of the analysis of the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the occupational health and quality of life of primary health care professionals, it is possible to conclude that these workers faced a series of unprecedented challenges during this critical period. Exposure to the virus, intensified workload, physical and emotional exhaustion, lack of resources and adequate training, and impacts on mental health were some of the main obstacles faced by these professionals.

The pandemic required rapid adaptation on the part of primary care professionals, who needed to implement new work practices to ensure the safety of patients and themselves. Despite the difficulties faced, these professionals demonstrated an unwavering dedication to providing essential care to the population, standing out as true heroes on the front lines of the fight against the disease.

However, it is essential to recognize that the pandemic has had a significant impact on the physical and mental health of these professionals, highlighting the importance of effective protection and support measures. Policies and strategies should be implemented to ensure adequate provision of personal protective equipment, access to psychological support and mental health services, ongoing training, and recognition of the work and effort of these professionals.

In addition, the pandemic has highlighted the need for investments in public health and strengthening of primary care systems as a way to prevent and address future health crises. By recognizing and valuing the fundamental role of primary care professionals, it is possible to promote the health and quality of life not only of these workers, but of the entire population that depends on primary health services.



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