

Correspondence

COVID-19: prioritizing healthcare workers

In dealing with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, governments have ignored the welfare of the most essential workers during this time—the healthcare workers. While health professionals and physicians are at the top of the list to be infected because of their exposures to patients, they have been deprived of fair salaries, proper training, personal protective equipment (PPE) and psychological and emotional interventions.

The non-prioritization of healthcare workers has led to detrimental effects. We have seen this in Italy and Spain at the onset of the pandemic.¹ In the case of Peru, the lack of training and PPE has led to high infection and mortality rates among physicians.² In one instance, a doctor even uses regular plastic bags as improvised PPE to protect himself from infection due to government budget constraints.³ Peruvian doctors have gone on strike as they demand for better working conditions and higher salaries.⁴ In the case of the Philippines, on the other hand, medical organizations have called for a second stricter enhanced community quarantine due to the critical level of the healthcare system and fatigue and depression of healthcare workers.⁵ Authorities refused to heed this call at first, prioritizing an antiterrorism bill⁶ and citing the economy as a motivation.^{7,8}

The most recent case in point, however, is the case of the Czech Republic. In September 2020, COVID-19 cases surged, putting pressure on healthcare workers and even forcing them to put their own safeties at risk.⁹ Authorities have been accused of being complacent with health measures due to the prioritization of public opinion and political leanings over recommendations of medical experts.⁹ As of 19 October 2020, the Czech Republic ‘now tops in new cases per capita’,¹⁰ and physician infections rose 6-fold and nurse infections 7-fold in the span of a month.⁹ US National Guard doctors will even be sent to the Czech Republic to help combat the pandemic.¹¹

There have been ethical debates as to whether healthcare workers should be prioritized with medical resources in times of COVID-19.^{12,13} If governments heeded healthcare workers’ needs, listened to them and took care of their welfares to begin with, there shall not be a need to have to decide between their lives or their patients’. Governments must make

informed decisions¹⁴ and learn from other governments’ mistakes in ignoring their healthcare workers. Although it is easier said than done, rather than being caught up with economic concerns, political leanings and bureaucracies, governments must prioritize healthcare workers as they are our only lifeline.

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