



Australian Journal of Nursing Research

Opinion Editorial Article

Paun O and Lois Platt L. Aus J Nursing Res AJNR-100010

Who's Taking Care of the Care Takers?

Paun O^{1*} and Lois Platt L²

¹Professor and the Nurses Alumni Association Chair in health and Aging, Rush University College of Nursing, Chicago, Illinois, USA

²Assistant Professor, Rush University College of Nursing, Chicago, Illinois, USA

***Corresponding author:** OlimpiaPaun, Professor and the Nurses Alumni Association Chair in health and Aging, Rush University College of Nursing, Chicago, Illinois, USA, Tel:(312) 942-6996; Email: Olimpia_Paun@rush.edu

Citation: Paun O and Lois Platt L (2020) Who's taking care of the care takers?. Aus J Nursing Res AJNR-100010

Received date: 27 May, 2020; **Accepted date:** 29 May, 2020; **Published date:** 05 June, 2020

The exponential spread of the COVID-19 contamination, compounded with a sluggish and unfocused response at the federal level has created a chaotic health care environment that fast became tragically overwhelmed in the United States of America (USA). The daily bombardment with gruesome statistics is counterbalanced by more and more personal stories of nurses and other health care professionals who carry on heroically at the cost of their own and their families' health. Among these, a New York ICU nurses' story captures the unbearable emotional toll of having to care for the very sick COVID-infected patients with limited resources and protective equipment. The grief is palpable in this young nurse's story, as he describes losing his patients at a rate of five to six in the span of one shift, only to start all over the following day. One can sense in PK's story the anguish of not being able to honor his commitment to provide the best care for his patients and the loneliness he feels surrounded by in the process. This story reflects the experience of most health care professionals who, like him, are in the front lines of the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

Under the overwhelming deluge of death, health care professionals are likely to reach a level of hopelessness that in some cases leads to suicide. The tragic death of Dr. Lauren Breen, a seasoned and successful Emergency Room physician in New York City brings to the fore the high cost of the pandemic to the human spirit. The physical and mental health effects on the surviving population in general and on the health care providers in particular will have long-lasting consequences. A recent article published in the Journal of the American Medical Association Psychiatry highlights the key factors creating the "perfect storm" for a surge in mental health issues in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic: the absence of a vaccine to prevent the spread of the virus, economic disaster, unprecedented job loss, food and shelter insecurity, increase in firearm purchases, social isolation and loneliness, generalized grief over multiple losses.

The most immediate risk is that of suicide, especially among those who have been in the front lines of providing care to patients that often had little to no chance of survival. Nurses and physicians in the USA were found for years to be at higher risk of suicide compared to the general population and this trend is not likely to be disrupted now. Unless meaningful preventive measures are being taken at national and local levels, we are bound to witness an upsurge in suicide rates. Among the long-term risks are Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and grief. PTSD is a condition experienced by generations of returning Soldiers and veterans and anyone who experiences traumatic events such as witnessing patients' death repeatedly, in spite of heroic efforts to save their lives. Left untreated, PTSD affects the individual, their families and even entire communities at large. Grief is a normal human reaction to loss that becomes exacerbated in the context of repeated and traumatic loss. The inability to even have a break from losing lives under one's watch over and over again is sure to lead to complicated grief.

In the midst of these challenges, as psychiatric nurses and university faculty, we see opportunities to decrease the risks, prevent, support, and nurture. Immediate questions are what can we do as human beings, mental health professionals and citizens of this world as we are sharing the same puzzling questions, emotions and thoughts about what is undeniably the biggest challenge of our lives?

As individuals, health care professionals can benefit from practicing mindfulness, performing a physical activity of their choice, practicing or listening to music, writing, and most importantly, connecting to others. Moving away from the isolation of grief helps build resilience. As professionals, we must be mindful of our students' and each other's need to be nurtured, understood, and checked upon in times like these. Our university already had a well-appointed Wellness Center prior to the pandemic. This center

became one of the main supports during the pandemic, supporting our medical center and university community with weekly town hall meetings in addition to the already available resources. As citizens of the world we raise awareness about the effects of the pandemic on our colleagues, our patients and our students in publications like this one.

The World Health Organization designated 2020 as the International Year of the Nurse and the Midwife to celebrate the 200th anniversary of Florence Nightingale's birth. As nurses, educators and scholars, we owe a debt of recognition to our profession and raise awareness of the sacrifices nurses and their health care colleagues make to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.