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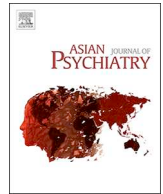
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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Asian Journal of Psychiatry

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ajp

The fight against COVID-19 and the restoration of trust in Chinese medical professionals



Abstract

Chinese medical professionals (CMPs) were embattled in a heroic fight against the continuing spread of COVID-19. As of February 13, 2020, over 60,000 people were infected, and 1300 died, overtaking the sudden acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) mortality rate. CMPs' response to the outbreak is challenging physician mistrust within Chinese society. The reasons for mistrust between CMPs and patients in China are complex (Tucker et al., 2016), including the imbalance of medical resources, the lack of a cultural environment of mutual trust, the lack of medical knowledge among patients, and massive privatization and health system reforms that led to incentives that distorted fees for medical services. Patient mistrust leads to medical violence, wherein CMPs are attacked when medical procedures are unsuccessful or associated with the death of loved ones (Hall et al., 2018). In a previous study of physicians, including in Hubei province, the epicenter of the outbreak, 92.7 % reported verbal abuse, 88.1 % experienced threats of assault and 81.0 % experienced physical assault (Shi et al., 2020). Before the outbreak, a doctor was brutally killed, and another was seriously injured.

The mental health burden of medical violence is high, with prevalence estimates of those exposed being greater than 25 % for post-traumatic stress disorder (Shi et al., 2017). Three years following the SARS outbreak, the burden of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was nearly 50 % for CMPs in Beijing with high work exposure (Wu et al., 2013). The double burden of previous exposure to workplace violence and the trauma of attending to the sick and dying amidst the COVID-19 outbreak will necessitate timely mental health interventions in the coming months (Shi and Hall, 2020). This will require urgent expansion of mental health services, including human resources, novel workplace interventions (Zandifar and Badrfam, 2020), and the expansion of digital and online platforms (Banerjee, 2019; Yao et al., 2020) to provide potentially scalable alternatives to face-to-face interventions. Limited evidence-based interventions for CMPs will complicate this response (Hall et al., 2018; Fang et al., 2019).

During the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak, the actions of front-line medical professionals have been widely applauded by the Chinese public, and images of their tireless efforts have been widely shared on Chinese social media. During the 2003 SARS outbreak, improved relationships between patients and CMPs were also noted but did not last.

Through the promotion of continued medical reform, equitable diagnosis and treatment, adequate resources to ensure high quality care, and positive media portrayals, public mistrust of CMPs can be reduced. This crisis can provide an opportunity for the public to restore their trust in CMPs who have provided care to countless affected patients, and protected the public and the world, from wider exposure to this pandemic.

Funding

The authors have no financial disclosures.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgements

The authors have no acknowledgements for this brief correspondence.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102072>

Received 1 April 2020; Accepted 2 April 2020

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J. Psychiatry 54, 302–311.

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Yiqun Gan^a, Yidi Chen^a, Cheng Wang^{b,c}, Carl Latkin^d, Brian J. Hall^{d,e,*}

^a *School of Psychological and Cognitive Sciences, Beijing Key Laboratory of Behavior and Mental Health, Peking University, China*

^b *Dermatology Hospital of Southern Medical University, China*

^c *Southern Medical University, Institute for Global Health and Sexually Transmitted Diseases, China*

^d *Department of Health Behavior and Society, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, USA*

^e *Global and Community Mental Health Research Group, Department of Psychology, University of Macau, Macao (SAR), China*

E-mail addresses: ygan@pku.edu.cn (Y. Gan), wangcheng090705@gmail.com (C. Wang), carl.latkin@jhu.edu (C. Latkin), brianhall@um.edu.mo (B.J. Hall).

* Corresponding author.