



Letter to the Editor

The Impact of Covid-19 on the Mental Health of Ophthalmology Trainees

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To the Editor:

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to an increased interest in the mental health and wellbeing of doctors. Traditionally, doctors have been viewed as being immune to mental health problems, however it has become evident that they are actually at an increased risk of suicide compared to most other professions. During the pandemic, frontline healthcare workers are at a higher risk of mental health conditions, due to a combination of risk of infection, greater responsibilities and excess workload [1].

Ophthalmologists are considered to be at a higher risk of contracting Covid-19 compared to some of their peers, due to the physical proximity required to examine an eye. At the height of the pandemic, the specialty was severely impacted by restrictions, whereby the majority of routine and elective procedures were cancelled [2]. In addition, staff shortages across hospitals worldwide led to the redeployment of ophthalmologists, especially trainees. In this short piece, we will discuss the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of Ophthalmology trainees.

A recent literature [3] was the first to provide an overview of studies on this topic, however the number of studies were limited. It found that an overwhelmingly majority of trainees across the world reported higher levels of anxiety and depression symptoms compared to pre-pandemic periods. It is unclear whether this is as a direct result of Covid-19, or due its impact on training opportunities, however some studies indicated redeployment being a major contributing factor. Another factor was uncertainty surrounding personal protective equipment and its availability.

Interestingly, one study found over 80% of trainees reporting to have more time for research activities, and over 40% reporting increased research productivity. Most trainees also reported positive experiences with online learning opportunities, and indicated a desire to utilise these in future. The review found the literature to agree that educators and institutions should place the mental health of trainees higher on their agenda, and should make counselling support available. From our observations and interactions as junior doctors working in Ophthalmology wards during the pandemic, we can relate to many of the findings from this review. However, it is apparent that the insights gleaned from the studies available is not sufficient to inform policy changes. A stronger body of evidence is required to ensure that risk factors are accurately identified, and a comprehensive understanding of trainee perspectives is acquired

It is also important to bear in mind the factors which can impact trainee's mental health. A vicious cycle was identified, whereby the pandemic has hindered training opportunities and also had a detrimental effect on the mental health of trainees and supervisors. The latter leads to a decline in the quality of the limited training, which can further impact on mental health. It is therefore important that educators and management consider both organisational and personal factors when implementing solutions.

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