



Policy Brief

Respect and Recovery from Covid-19

Team: Professor Stephanie Snow, PI (University of Manchester) Dr Angela Whitecross, Co-I, (University of Manchester), Dr Rob Perks, Co-I, (British Library)

Summary of the research

'It'll be a little bit like one of the war conflicts... we'll end up losing more colleagues due to the after-effects and the mental health if we don't deal with it well than we will actually in the conflict.'

'I worry that we'll have a mass-exodus of healthcare professionals that just basically get entirely broken by Covid and can't ever face working in healthcare again.'

NHS Voices of Covid-19 is collecting testimonies from NHS staff, clinical leaders, policymakers, and patients about the impacts and consequences of the pandemic on their personal and working lives and wider communities. The collection will form a permanent resource for research and policymaking at the British Library. To date upwards of 2,000 interviews have been collected amounting to around 1,500 hours of audio recording. Voices from England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland are represented in the collection. Oral history methodology facilitates sense-making and reflection on the part of interviewees. It evidences the scale and depth of the effects and longer term consequences of the pandemic on staff and on health services more broadly. A unique strength is the contextualisation within the longer history of the NHS through the NHS at 70 project which began work in 2017 and provides a baseline for comparison and contrast.

Policy recommendations

- Support NHS staff to recover from the impacts of the pandemic on their physical and mental health by offering a range of counselling, psychotherapy, and bereavement support services that are external to their place of work. Many NHS Trusts have established support systems but staff report there are long waits for treatment. They are also concerned about confidentiality and would prefer to seek support outside of work.
- Establish dialogue with the public about what it is reasonable for the NHS to provide as staff struggle to cope with the backlog of treatments and continue to care for Covid-19 patients so that patient expectations are reasonable.
- Building back the NHS in the wake of the pandemic should be viewed as an opportunity to address longstanding historical and structural issues especially the interrelated issues of workforce shortages and racism and discrimination. The government must stop treating workforce issues and immigration legislation as separate policy streams.

Key findings

The Covid-19 pandemic has had an exceptional impact on frontline workers. The strongest themes emerging from our research are related to the psychological, emotional, and physical impact of the pandemic on NHS staff. These include moral injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression. The pressures of coping with backlogs and long waiting lists whilst continuing to care for Covid-19 patients

- NHS staff report that patients are now much less tolerant about delays in treatments and the ongoing effects of the pandemic on the health system. NHS staff are receiving physical and verbal abuse from patients.
- NHS staff are working harder than ever to respond to the backlog and shorten waiting times. They are worried about the longterm sustainability of working in this way and the dangers posed to their physical, emotional, and psychological health.
- Widespread exhaustion and burnout is creating low morale across the workforce and affecting day to day interactions with patients and other NHS staff.
- Longstanding workforce shortages mean that there is no 'slack' in the system and current staff are already leaving the Service through early retirement or moving to an alternative career.

Further information

- NHS Voices of Covid-19 website – nhs70.org.uk
- Emma Jones and Stephanie J Snow, *Against the Odds? Black and Minority Ethnic Clinicians and Manchester, 1948-2009*, Carnegie Publishing, 2010. (PDF available on request).
- Stephanie J Snow and Emma Jones, 'Immigration and the National Health Service: Putting History to the Forefront', *History & Policy*.
<http://www.historyandpolicy.org/papers/policy-paper-118.html>
- Stephanie J Snow, Jolanta Shields, Angela Whitecross, Evidence submitted to the British Academy's enquiry into the longterm societal effects and impacts of Covid-19, December 2020. <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/covid-decade-nhs-voices-of-covid-19/>
- Esther Hitchen, Stephanie J Snow, Angela Whitecross, Evidence submitted to the National Accounts Committee on NHS Backlogs and Waiting Times, December 2021. <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/1582/nhs-backlogs-and-waiting-times/publications/written-evidence/>

Contact

Stephanie Snow: Email: stephanie.snow@manchester.ac.uk Tel: 07758 625957

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