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IHI-HIP COVID-19 Essay Contest

The healthcare workforce has long suffered from many issues, but the current COVID-19 pandemic is only making this worse. Healthcare workers have large amounts of student debt to pay back. Mental health conditions and suicides among healthcare workers have been rampant, due to unsympathetic workplaces and harsh working conditions, or as many have put it, “moral injury.” The pressures of the pandemic have only magnified these problems. Both healthcare administrators and healthcare workers must work together to not only solve these issues for the current situation, but also for the future. This will also ensure that healthcare workers are better able to take care of their patients.

Healthcare workers need to have their student loans forgiven. They accrue hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt and many do not make much in the early years of their career. For the danger they are putting themselves in and the sacrifices they have made and continue to make, this is unacceptable. During this pandemic, many have been forced to pay for separate accommodations away from their families and shell out for their own PPE, while figuring out how to support themselves and their families. They should not have the added stress of figuring out how to pay back their loans as well. This will also solve the problem of the doctor shortage in the USA. More people will be willing to go through the years of training required. This will improve access to healthcare for rural and low-income populations, since people will also be more willing to go into lower income specialties. In addition, the field of healthcare will be more accessible to underrepresented minorities and economically disadvantaged populations. This will only build trust in the healthcare system, since patients are more likely to trust people who look like them. This will also be a benefit to the field as a whole, because a diversity of populations leads to a diversity of ideas.

Mental health is largely disregarded in the field of healthcare. However, suicide is higher in the healthcare population than it is in the general population. Healthcare workers are forced to hide their illnesses and difficulties due to stigma. Due to this stigma, disclosing a mental illness can prevent healthcare workers from receiving their licenses or cause them to lose their jobs. Even if they are told that there will be no consequences for getting help, they are not given the resources to do so. No time is scheduled for them to see a therapist or psychiatrist. Instead the responsibility is placed on them to find a way to combat “burnout” and they are given “wellness modules” to complete, only adding to their already busy schedules and workload. During this pandemic, mental illness and suicide among healthcare workers has only increased. It is predicted that at the end of this, many healthcare workers will suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), due to what they have seen and experienced.

The way to improve this is to first remove the stigma about mental health. A mental illness does not in any way make a healthcare worker unable to perform their job efficiently. In fact, it may make them better at their job because they are able to empathize with their patients. All healthcare workers should be allotted time in their schedules to see a therapist who is unaffiliated with their healthcare system to protect confidentiality. They should not be forced to work 30-hour shifts, as it is a well-known fact that sleep deprivation is detrimental to both physical and mental health. Poor mental

health also leads to bad coping skills, such as unhealthy eating, smoking or alcohol. These habits may lead to chronic illnesses, which will, if anything, reduce productivity. The easiest way to protect the health of the people is to first protect the health of our healthcare workers.

Healthcare workers have always been given the short end of the stick. The COVID-19 pandemic has only magnified this. They are forced to work in dangerous, stressful conditions. In return, they are told that they “signed up for this” or heralded as heroes and given massive public displays, instead of being given the help they need. Medicine is largely considered a field of sacrifice. Yes, healthcare workers signed up to save lives, to give up large amounts of time with their families and even to give up some sleep. But they did not sign up to work without adequate compensation, or without proper PPE. This is the equivalent of sending military personnel into a battlefield without proper armor or weapons. We would never accept that, so how can we accept this? Solving these issues will not only improve their lives, but all of ours. We rely on healthcare workers to take care of us and save our lives, but they can only do that if we protect them first.