

EFFECTS OF COMMUNICATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON EMPLOYEES OF HOMES FOR THE ELDERLY AND INFIRM

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic is a pervasive problem that has affected all segments of endeavour, especially in the social welfare system. Consequently, the high risk of COVID-19 infections of the users of homes for the elderly and infirm and employees is known. The aim of this paper is to point out the importance and role of employees in homes for the elderly and infirm during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this paper highlights the dangers, threats or challenges faced by employees in homes for the elderly and infirm since they are directly and daily in communication and interaction with the most at-risk group. Furthermore, the paper points to the need for support systems in which interpersonal communication with employees is necessary in order to preserve work activity. The authors present the results of a survey conducted on a sample of 132 employees. The results show how much the communication process during the pandemic affects employees and their approach to work with the aim of preserving their psychological state and thus the life quality of people placed in homes for the elderly and infirm.

Keywords: *COVID-19, communication, the elderly, employees of homes for the elderly and infirm*

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic brought many challenges, and one of the biggest was preventing the outbreak in homes for the elderly and infirm. In its report, the World Health Organization (2020) emphasises that the COVID-19 can affect people of all ages but that the most vulnerable group are the elderly and people suffering from chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, chronic respiratory diseases, diabetes, and cancer (WHO, 2020). The users of homes for the elderly and infirm constitute such most at-risk group. Namely, the elderly who need 24-hour care and assistance from another person due to their health or social condition inhabit homes for the elderly and infirm. The vast majority of the elderly suffer from various chronic diseases and impairments, which puts them at high risk not only from disease but also from developing severe complications and high mortality rates from COVID-19 (Barnett and Grabowski, 2020). In Osijek-Baranja County, there are three decentralised homes for the elderly and infirm with a total accommodation capacity of 770 users, employing over 200 people. According to a survey conducted by the authors on a sample of 150 users of homes for the elderly and infirm, it was found that 29.3% of users have physical disabilities, 26 % of users have diabetes, 16.7% of users suffer from kidney disease, 16% of users have intestinal problems, 6.7% of liver diseases, and 5.3% of users have malignant diseases.

Numerous measures, recommendations and instructions have been adopted for homes for the elderly and infirm and other social welfare institutions in order to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus infection. At the beginning of the pandemic (March 2020), the World Health Organization recognised the threat and stated that all measures are in line with their guidelines described in the document “Infection Prevention and Control Guidance for Long-Term Care Facilities in the Context of COVID-19” (2020), but pointed to the importance of protecting the mental health of the employees of long-term accommodation providers. Namely, employees need to be protected from stress as much as possible, mentally and physically, in order to fulfil their role, and they need to be provided with all the necessary support and information to cope with the COVID-19 virus (WHO, 2020).

Despite numerous measures, including a ban on both visits and leaving the facility, the COVID-19 pandemic had devastating effects on homes for the elderly and infirm and other social welfare institutions that provide long-term accommodation. Worldwide, large numbers of infections and deaths have been reported (Chen et al., 2021). As shown in Table 1, in Osijek-Baranja County, in the period from the beginning of the pandemic to 16 September 2021, the total number of users infected with COVID-19 was 257. The total number of users who died of COVID-19 was 25. Furthermore, the total number of employees infected with COVID-19 was 97, without fatal outcomes.

Table 1. Indicators of infected and deceased users and employees of homes for the elderly and infirm

No.	Indicators	Number of users infected with COVID-19	Number of users who died with COVID-19	Number of employees infected with COVID-19	Number of employees who died with COVID-19
1	Home for the elderly and infirm 1	93	8	47	-
2	Home for the elderly and infirm 2	16	-	16	-
3	Home for the elderly and infirm 3	148	17	34	-
	Total	257	25	97	-

These data indicate that employees faced a high number of users infected with COVID-19 at their workplace, which significantly impacted their daily work. This is confirmed by a study conducted by White et al. (2021). Respondents stated that they experienced burnout and described the physical, mental, and emotional burdens caused by work overload and learning new roles and processes. In addition, they expressed a high degree of care and empathy towards their users going through isolation, illness and death. They also cite the fear of infection and negative media coverage of COVID-19 outbreak in homes for the elderly and infirm aimed at employees (White et al., 2021). Furthermore, employees also experienced many psychological challenges, including uncertainty, hopelessness, work overload, and role conflicts (Mo and Shi, 2020). Fear of the unknown and concern for what lies ahead are also challenges reported by employees of homes for the elderly and infirm (Unroe and Vest, 2020). Research has shown that the biggest source of stress for employees is workload (Hapell et al., 2013), and during the COVID-19 pandemic, employees associate major stressors with their new roles, responsibilities for users, security concerns and work overload (Zhao et al., 2021). The most commonly reported symptoms of stress were agitation, fear, anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, and headache (Chew et al., 2020). In addition to all the challenges they faced, employees in homes for the elderly and infirm also reported a lack of communication, a lack of information, and a lack of support and assistance (The Queen's Nursing Institute, 2020).

Research to date has not described the ways in which staff cope with all the challenges previously described (Van Houtven et al., 2020). Strategies for dealing with stress and challenges are usually individualised and depend on personal experiences, the level of education, and the

resources available to them in the community (Braun-Lewensohn and Mayer, 2020). For this reason, the purpose of this research is to show the condition of employees of homes for the elderly and infirm, what has contributed and continues to contribute to their psychological state, and in what way and to what extent they have received help and support. From the above, the goal is to emphasise the importance of interpersonal communication with employees and among employees to contribute to the preservation of the employees' psychological state during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

In accordance with the stated purpose and the research goal, the following hypotheses were set:

H1: Communication with employees of homes for the elderly and infirm is important for preserving the employees' psychological state.

H2: The provided support had the effect of reducing negative situations among employees.

METHOD

The data collection process was conducted via an anonymous questionnaire constructed by the authors of the paper in order to determine the importance of providing assistance and support to employees in homes for the elderly and infirm during the COVID-19 pandemic. All data collected were processed in the IBM SPSS Statistics statistical program. In addition to socio-demographic characteristics, the questionnaire also contained closed-type statements according to the Likert scale, which consisted of dependent variables, and related to the condition of employees of homes for the elderly and infirm during the COVID-19 pandemic, which contributed to their psychological state and who received support during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, two open-ended questions were asked to which respondents had the opportunity to state what contributed and still contributes to their psychological state and describe how they were provided with help or support during the COVID-19 pandemic. Survey questionnaires were distributed to employees at their workplaces. For the purposes of the research, the method of analysis was used to analyse the results in this case, the method of synthesis to reach new conclusions, the method of proving which in this study tried to prove the truth of the hypotheses, the survey method was based on written data on attitudes and opinions with the help of a survey questionnaire, and was conducted on a sample of 132 respondents, and the statistical method was used to statistically process and graphically present the data collected by the survey questionnaire, which at the same time confirmed the hypotheses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research involved 132 respondents, employees of homes for the elderly and infirm in Osijek-Baranja County. The analysis of socio-demographic data showed that out of the total number of respondents ($N = 132$), there were 115 (87.1%) women and 17 (12.9%) men. Regarding age, nine respondents (6.8%) were aged 20-29, 19 (14.4%) were aged 30 to 39, 36 respondents (27.3%) were aged 40 to 49 years, 47 (35.6%) in the range of 50 to 59 years and 21 respondents (15.9%) in the range between 60 and 65 years. The level of education indicates that 11 respondents (8.3%) have completed primary school, 107 respondents (81.1%) have a secondary education, 6 respondents (4.5%) have a university degree, and 8 respondents have completed a university degree (6.1%). Furthermore, as far as the occupations themselves are concerned, they are very diverse, with the majority being caregivers 39 (29.4%), followed by nurses 33 (25%), chefs and assistant chefs 21 (15.9%), 12 (9, 1%) economists, 6 (4.5%) housekeepers, 4 (3.1%) social workers, 2 (1.6%) occupational therapists and 15 (11.4%) participants employed in technical support roles.

Furthermore, in Table 2 and Table 3, the employees of homes for the elderly and infirm assessed on the Likert scale, from 1 (I completely disagree) to 4 (I completely agree), their situation during the COVID-19 pandemic and what contributed and still contributes to their psychological state. Table 2 presents how frightened, anxious, insecure, restless, lonely they felt and whether they had increased fatigue and insomnia. The data analysis shows that employees least agreed with the statement that they felt lonely $M = 2.05$; $SD = 1.206$ and frightened $M = 2.27$; $SD = 1.173$ and that they suffered from insomnia $M = 2.23$; $SD = 1.221$. The highest observed average was for the statements related to increased employee fatigue during the COVID-19 pandemic $M = 3.02$; $SD = 1.156$, followed by a feeling of anxiety $M = 2.45$; $SD = 1.161$.

Table 2. The state of employees of homes for the elderly and infirm during the COVID-19 pandemic with regard to support provided:

Statements	I completely disagree	I mostly disagree	I mostly agree	I completely agree	M	SD
I felt scared.	49 (37.1%)	26 (19.7%)	29 (22%)	28 (21.2%)	2.27	1.173
I felt anxious.	39 (29.5%)	28 (21.2%)	32 (24.2%)	33 (25%)	2.45	1.161
I felt insecure.	51 (38.6%)	21 (15.9%)	30 (22.7%)	30 (22.7%)	2.30	1.203
I felt restless.	53 (40.2%)	16 (12.1%)	33 (25%)	30 (22.7%)	2.30	1.217
I felt lonely.	66 (50%)	19 (14.4%)	21 (15.9%)	26 (19.7%)	2.05	1.206
I experienced increased fatigue.	23 (17.4%)	17 (12.9%)	26 (19.7%)	66 (50%)	3.02	1.156
I experienced insomnia.	53 (40.2%)	29 (22%)	17 (12.9%)	33 (25%)	2.23	1.221

Furthermore, in Table 3, employees assessed what contributed or still contributes to their psychological state. The results show that employees agreed the least with the statement that communication with a physician $M = 2.43$ contributed to this; $SD = 1.147$ and communication with users $M = 2.45$; $SD = 1.121$. Employees of the homes for the elderly and infirm estimated that information circulating from the media on the development of the COVID-19 pandemic contributed and still contributes the most to their psychological state ($M = 2.98$; $SD = 1.066$), with 55 employees (41.7%) completely and 37 (28%) employees mostly agreeing with the statement. This is followed by communication with colleagues at work ($M = 2.80$; $SD = 1.030$), with 41 employees (31.1%) completely and 42 (31.8%) employees mostly agreeing with the statement. These results support hypothesis H1, which states that communication with employees of homes for the elderly and infirm is important for preserving the employees' psychological state. Therefore, it can be concluded that all those who work towards achieving organisational goals are responsible for effective communication (Wehrich and Koontz, 1994).

Table 3. Communication contributing to my psychological state

Statement	I completely disagree	I mostly disagree	I mostly agree	I completely agree	M	SD
Media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic development.	18 (13.6%)	22 (16.7%)	37 (28%)	55 (41.7%)	2.98	1.066
Communication with colleagues at work.	18 (13.6%)	31 (23.5%)	42 (31.8%)	41 (31.1%)	2.80	1.030
Communication with supervisors.	24 (18.2%)	29 (22%)	45 (34.1%)	34 (25.8%)	2.67	1.052
Communication with users.	37 (28%)	28 (21.2%)	38 (28.8%)	29 (22%)	2.45	1.121
Communication with a physician.	39 (29.5%)	22 (16.7%)	42 (31.8%)	28 (21.2%)	2.43	1.147

In Table 4, employees of homes for the elderly and infirm assessed from 1 (I completely disagree) to 4 (I completely agree) on the Likert scale on who provided them with the most support during the COVID-19 pandemic. Analysis of the data indicates that they received almost no help from psychologists $M = 1.20$; $SD = 0.704$, and psychiatrist $M = 1.22$; $SD = 0.724$. Most employees agree that they received the most support from colleagues at work $M = 3.01$; $SD = 1.195$, followed by supervisors $M = 2.52$; $SD = 1.263$.

Table 4. Impact of support during the pandemic COVID 19

Statement	I completely disagree	I mostly disagree	I mostly agree	I completely agree	M	SD
I received support from my superiors.	45 (34.1%)	16 (12.1%)	28 (21.2%)	43 (32.6%)	2.52	1.263
I received support from a psychologist.	121 (91.7 %)	3 (2.3%)	1 (0.8%)	7 (5.3%)	1.20	0.704
I received support from a psychiatrist.	119 (90.2%)	4 (3%)	2 (1.5%)	7 (5.3%)	1.22	0.724
I received support from my colleagues at work.	26 (19.7%)	10 (7.6%)	37 (28%)	62 (44.7%)	3.01	1.195

Furthermore, during the analysis of the content of the answers to the open-ended question: "In what way did you receive help and support?" eight categories were identified. Namely, employees of homes for the elderly and infirm state that they received the most help and support in the form of conversations (N = 33), followed by communication and support from colleagues (N = 31) and communication with superiors (N = 7), and two employees (N = 2) state that help and support were provided to them through communication with their families. Furthermore, ten employees (N = 10) stated that they had not received the support they required, while seven (N = 7) stated they did not even need help and support. Four employees (N = 4) describe the help and support they received in the form of vaccination, and one employee (N = 1) claims to receive the most help and support from God and faith. Other respondents (N = 46) did not answer this question.

The results obtained in Tables 2 and 4 support hypothesis H2 that the support provided had the effect of reducing the negative states in employees. Considering the research results by numerous authors, the negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are known, such as mortality, new comorbidities and the risks we face in homes for the elderly and infirm for the users themselves. However, much less attention has been focused on how the pandemic has affected the lives of employees in long-term care facilities caring for the most vulnerable populations (White et al., 2021). Namely, a review of the literature on PubMed shows that most of the articles focus on users, and out of 425 articles published from 1 January 2020, only two deal with employees (Hoedl et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has brought many challenges to employees of homes for the elderly and infirm in their workplaces. Employees were forced to balance concern for their own safety, user welfare and financial stability during the pandemic. Higher demands, work overload, frequent changes in measures to prevent the spread of the virus, and limited resources are just some of the challenges employees face on a daily basis (Denny Brown et al., 2020). Hoedl et al. (2021) conducted a qualitative survey on a sample of 18 employees of homes for the elderly and infirm. The main problems described

in the research related to the burden of additional tasks, communication with users' families, and psychological consequences related to insecurity, fear, and stress (Hoedl et al., 2021). A study by Blanco-Donoso et al. (2020) also reports a high level of exhaustion and mental and physical stress. A quantitative survey was conducted on a sample of 335 employees of homes for the elderly and infirm. In addition to exhaustion, fear, and burnout at work, employees reported a high level of professional satisfaction, which depended on support systems (Blanco-Donoso et al., 2021).

In the United States, based on research by Denny Brown et al. (2020), the need for a support system for employees of homes for the elderly and infirm was identified. Anxiety, sadness, fatigue, increased responsibility and care for customers who need 24-hour help affect the emotional state of employees. Accordingly, guidelines for recognising and coping with stress and professional helplines were developed, and a webinar was held for principals that provided them with tools to strengthen employee resilience and provide adequate support and recommendations for maintaining mental health (Denny Brown et al., 2020). Kusmaul (2021) places responsibility for employees on institutions and points to recommendations that contribute to security, which relate to fostering trust through transparency, involvement in decision-making and providing opportunities to share experiences with other professionals, group therapy, mentoring and self-help (Kusmaul, 2021). Furthermore, a study conducted by Blanco-Donoso et al. (2021) showed that employees with higher social support at work had a higher level of professional satisfaction in demanding working conditions (Blanco-Donoso et al., 2021), which was confirmed by other research indicating that social support from colleagues and superiors leads to high levels of job satisfaction (Bishop et al., 2009; Choi et al., 2012).

This research results indicate that the employees of homes for the elderly and infirm, for the most part, felt anxious and experienced increased fatigue during the COVID-19 pandemic. What has largely contributed and continues to contribute to their psychological state largely is the media coverage on the development of the COVID-19 pandemic and communication with colleagues at work. Namely, the research results show that employees were not provided with professional help and support but mainly relied on support and communication with colleagues at work, and to a lesser extent, with superiors. In addition, a smaller number of participants stated that they did not receive any help and support, even though they needed it. Considering the review of previous research and relying on the results of the above, it can be concluded that various forms of professional help and support, such as supervision and establishment of mobile teams involving psychologists and psychiatrists, are necessary for the survival and functioning of the system and for preserving psychical and physical health of employees of homes for the elderly and infirm. Namely, as can be seen from the theoretical presentation of this paper, work overload, fatigue, uncertainty, insecurity, and hopelessness are just some of the problems cited by employees of homes for the elderly and infirm. In conclusion, without an adequate support system in overly demanding working conditions and

excessive psychophysical and emotional burdens, the continued functioning of the system and the preservation of employee health will be difficult to sustain.

The practical implications of this research relate primarily to the discovery of areas for prevention in the protection of the mental health of employees of homes for the elderly and infirm, with the aim of preventing long-term consequences. Relying on the paper's research results and theoretical presentation, it is necessary to design appropriate support and assistance systems for employees and provide them with tools and programmes to strengthen them and increase their psychological resilience. One of the work methods can be online courses to educate employees of homes for the elderly and infirm, who will provide them with the knowledge to face the challenges in this pandemic condition (Zhao et al., 2021). Furthermore, the recommendations identified by The Queen's Nursing Institute (2020) include increasing salaries, improving working conditions, ensuring adequate staff to users ratio in institutions, providing training on infectious diseases and weekly training on new measures and protocols, enabling employees the right to negotiate important decisions and supervision (The Queen's Nursing Institute, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This paper presents the importance of establishing interpersonal communication with employees in homes for the elderly and infirm during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is the communication process that contributes to reducing the risk to the psychological state of employees who face a number of difficulties in their work every day given the scope of work and the specifics of the most at-risk group they work with, i.e. the elderly. Namely, during this pandemic period, institutions in which older adults were accommodated were closed, and the users were isolated from the public. This type of crisis has created another psychological pressure on the users and the employees. The research presented and discussed in this paper aimed at examining the importance of interpersonal communication with employees and among employees with the aim of contributing to maintaining the psychological state of employees during and after the COVID-19 pandemic and was conducted using a survey method. The collected results of the research, which involved 132 employees of homes for the elderly and infirm, support the hypotheses. Respondents confirmed that media coverage of COVID-19 development, communication with colleagues at work and communication with superiors are important aspects of communication to them. At the same time, systematic support has been confirmed, which contributes to a better work atmosphere and the emotional wellbeing of employees. Therefore, this research directs the authors to further research focused on proactive communication strategies to provide new guidelines in situations faced by employees and can make an applicative contribution to creating a model that would contribute to the post-COVID period during which further consequences need to be prevented.

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UČINCI KOMUNIKACIJE TIJEKOM PANDEMIJE COVID 19 NA ZAPOSLENIKE DOMOVA ZA STARIJE I NEMOĆNE OSOBE

Sažetak

Pandemija COVID-a 19 sveprisutni je problem koji je ostavio posljedice u svim segmentima djelovanja, a posebno u sustavu socijalne skrbi. Slijedom toga, poznato je stanje visoke stope rizika od oboljenja COVID 19 u domovima za starije i nemoćne osobe za korisnike, ali i za zaposlenike. Cilj je rada ukazati na važnost i ulogu zaposlenika u domovima za starije i nemoćne osobe tijekom pandemije COVID 19. Upravo stoga, ovim radom ukazalo se na opasnosti, prijetnje ili izazove s kojima su se susretali zaposleni u domovima za starije i nemoćne osobe jer su oni neposredno i svakodnevno u komunikaciji i interakciji s najrizičnijom skupinom. Nadalje, radom se ukazuje na potrebu za sustavima podrške u kojima je interpersonalna komunikacija sa zaposlenicima neophodna kako bi se očuvala radna aktivnost. Autori u radu predstavljaju rezultate istraživanja provedenog na uzorku od 132 zaposlenika. Rezultati služe kako bi se predočilo koliko proces komunikacije tijekom pandemije utječe na zaposlenike i na njihov pristup u radu s ciljem očuvanja njihovog psihološkog stanja, a samim time i kvalitete života osoba smještenih u domovima za starije i nemoćne osobe..

Ključne riječi: *COVID 19, komunikacija, osobe treće životne dobi, zaposlenici domova za starije i nemoćne osobe*