

The Effects of SARS-CoV-2 Infection on the Occupational Functional Status of Healthcare Workers in eThekweni KwaZulu-Natal – Translating Research into Policy

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Background

Healthcare workers are at high risk of occupational acquired SARS-CoV-2 infections due to increased viral exposure within healthcare settings. Post COVID-19 condition, a sequela of infection can present with chronic health effects and permanent disability requiring workplace accommodation. This study aimed to determine the relationship between SARS-CoV-2 infection and occupational functional status among healthcare workers (HCWs).

Methods

A cross-sectional study was conducted at a tertiary hospital in eThekweni KwaZulu-Natal. All HCWs diagnosed with SARS-CoV-2 infection between December 2020 and December 2021 were invited to participate. The total sample recruited was 140. Participants were categorised into seven groups according to job demands. The work productivity and activity impairment questionnaire and the six-minute walk test were occupational functional status outcome measures. Multilinear and Poisson regressions were performed with outputs of coefficients and 95% confidence intervals.

Results

The majority, 89%, had mild COVID-19 disease when diagnosed. Medical doctors N= 7 had the least, 2.85% overall work impairment, while allied professionals N=15, consisting of radiographers, dieticians, and social workers, had increased work impairment, 36.3%. Administrative personnel reported the highest overall impairment compared to medical doctors, 2.12% (95% CI 1.67-2.57). Professional nurses had a decrease of 58 meters (95% CI -151.24-34.61) for the six-minute walk test compared to the reference group. A significant number, N= 79, had at least one symptom of the post COVID-19 condition. These HCWs had a 1.04% (95% CI 0.95-1.12) increase in overall work impairment with a decrease of 28.72 meters (95% CI 67.05- 9.60) for the six-minute walk distance.

Conclusions

Occupational functional status post SARS-CoV-2 infection is most likely independent of physical job demand, as work impairment was noted in all categories of HCWs.

Advocacy: These findings have a major impact on the Return to Work capacity of many workers who may have sequelae post SARS-CoV-2 infection. Return to work assessments must have an individualised approach. The engagement of stakeholders at a higher level is required to draft policies that enhance rehabilitation through multidisciplinary models. With the healthcare needs of workers changing post SARS-CoV-2, relevant legislation and policy guidelines should be adapted to incorporate the translation of research into practice.