HEALTHCARE WORKERS FEAR MENTAL HEALTH STIGMA

The Covid-19 pandemic has sparked a rise in mental health disorders worldwide, with frontline healthcare workers among the most affected, yet those but who are more likely to suffer in silence than seek help for their own symptoms of anxiety, depression, stress and burnout.

The Healthcare Workers Care Network (HWCN) found that 82% of South African doctors, nurses and allied health professionals using its counselling services believe there is a stigma attached to healthcare workers asking for help with their own mental health.

The network was set up early in the pandemic by a number of healthcare professional bodies*, anticipating the added stresses on healthcare workers and aiming to provide mental health support through a 24-hour helpline and online counselling, individual and group support, and training. The services have reached almost 5 000 healthcare workers since April 2020, with an average of 175 calls to the helpline per month.

A recent survey of healthcare workers who used the services revealed high levels of reluctance to seek help for mental health challenges, and the reasons why.

For 80% of the healthcare workers, fear of judgement by colleagues, managers and their profession, was the main reason for being unwilling or delaying finding support for their mental health concerns.

They fear being seen as incompetent, weak and unfit to do their jobs because of expectations that healthcare workers should be more resilient and better-equipped than the general public to deal with work stress and manage their own mental health.

Expectations that healthcare workers should be able to fix themselves are unrealistic, placing health professionals at risk, as well as their patients and the healthcare system as a whole.

With a third of South Africans experiencing mental illness at some point in their lifetimes, and mental disorders the leading cause of disability, it's illogical to think that healthcare workers are exempt from mental health challenges.

Despite this, the stigma attached to mental health is magnified in the healthcare sector amid intense pressure to deliver, be resilient, super-human even, and a fear of showing any sign of weakness.

Healthcare workers who avoid seeking help are at risk of self-medicating, potentially leading to substance abuse and suicide.

Healthcare workers are our first responders in a crisis like the pandemic, and they will be our guides and community allies on the road to recovery as the pandemic ends. We need to ensure that we support their mental health, wellbeing and resilience in order to ensure our health system is
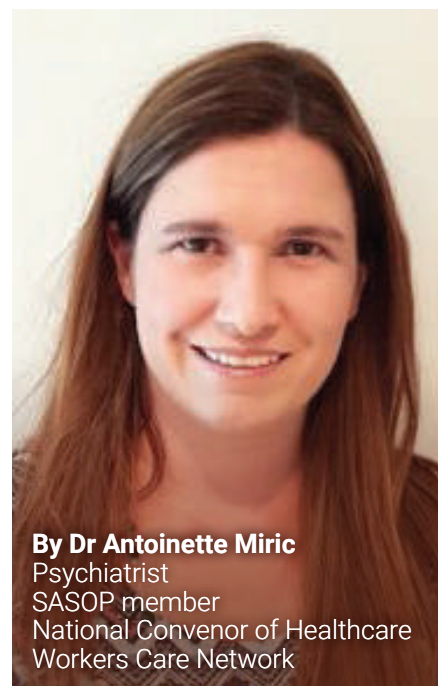
By Dr Antoinette Miric
Psychiatrist
SASOP member
National Convenor of Healthcare Workers Care Network

strong, robust and robust coming out of the pandemic and prepared for the next crisis.

The respondents in the HWCN survey – a combination of doctors, nurses, support staff and allied professionals such as counsellors and social workers, in both the public and private sectors, spoke of expectations that they should be always in control and that their training should equip them to look after their own health.

Many commented that the perception of "How can you help others if you cannot help yourself?" made them reluctant to open up to

colleagues or managers that they're struggling with their mental health or to seek professional help.

The healthcare workers feared that a mental health issue would make them seem incompetent or weak, a burden on co-workers, and that their credibility and competence would be questioned.

They revealed a need to "be seen as human beings behind the lab coat or uniform", with one respondent saying that "there needs to be an understanding that despite our profession we're still human beings and need just as much, if not more, support, as we take on so much – we hold everyone but ourselves".

"We need to highlight the humanity of the person in the lab coat or nursing uniform. We are humans first, with emotions and challenges as much as everyone else. Our qualifications and skills don't shield us from psychiatric illness, hence we're not immune and should not be viewed as 'less than' when we have challenges," said another.

The survey has highlighted the need to improve workplace support for mental health in the healthcare sector, with respondents calling for more education, awareness and open communication that acknowledged the challenges to mental health of working in healthcare.

"Healthcare professionals need to be reminded that they cannot pour from an empty cup, and that taking care of themselves enables them to serve others," commented one respondent.

There is also a need to make support more easily accessible, greater awareness of the resources and services that are available, and to ensure confidence in the privacy and confidentiality of support services.

The respondents were clear that mental health and seeking help in the healthcare professions needs to be normalised and made a part of everyday language and interactions in healthcare workplaces. This can be achieved through by making regular workplace wellness check-ins and mental health care a standard part of the 'package of care' for those in these professions.

Mental illness needs to be treated the same as physical illness in terms of medical aid, disability and income protection insurance, and workplace policies such as sick leave benefits," she said.

Operations Director of the South African Depression and Anxiety Group, Cassey Chambers says, "We know already that amongst healthcare workers, poor help-seeking behaviour exists where they are less likely to reach out for help or support due to stigma and fear. Through the HWCN, we're aiming to not only reduce the stigma associated with mental health but also to change the narrative and speak openly on accessing support when needed and being more aware of the warning signs."

* The HWCN network is a joint initiative of the South African Medical Association (SAMA), the SA Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG), the SA Society of Psychiatrists (SASOP), and the SA Society of Anaesthetists (SASA), supported by the Psychological Society of SA (PsySSA). Visit www.healthcareworkerscarenetwork.org.za for more information.
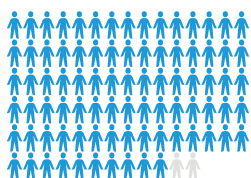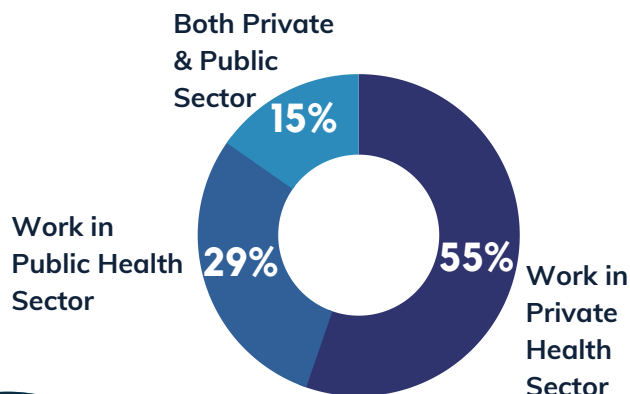
SOUTH AFRICAN HEALTHCARE WORKERS & MENTAL HEALTH STIGMA SURVEY APRIL 2022

A diverse group of Healthcare Workers shared their different views on Healthcare Workers and Stigma related to Mental Health in South Africa
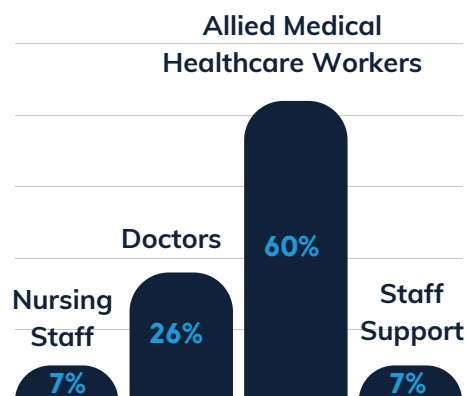
98%

Of Survey participants are Healthcare Workers

83%

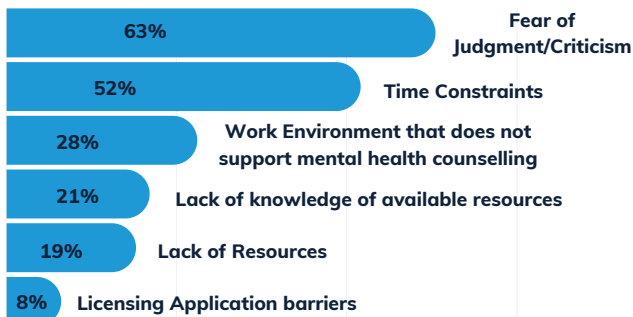Participants say there is a Stigma amongst Healthcare Workers accessing help for their Mental Health

Breakdown of Participants

Both Private & Public Sector **15%**

Work in Public Health Sector **29%**

55% Work in Private Health Sector

91% of Participants say Healthcare Workers are reluctant to seek Mental Health support

Allied Medical Healthcare Workers

Doctors

Nursing Staff **7%**

26%

60%

Staff Support **7%**

Healthcare Workers are reluctant to seek Mental Health help due to:

63%	Fear of Judgment/Criticism
52%	Time Constraints
28%	Work Environment that does not support mental health counselling
21%	Lack of knowledge of available resources
19%	Lack of Resources
8%	Licensing Application barriers

Participants' views on how to reduce Mental Health Stigma amongst Healthcare Workers

Openly sharing challenges in mental health, being vulnerable, without fear of judgment	Interactive programs offered to the community health care workers
Mental health needs to be addressed and made part of everyday language and not only addressed when there is a crisis. Prevention is better than a cure.	Education about mental health and the resources available and the role of each.
Mental health should be part of a comprehensive package of care for the caregiver	Normalise it by talking about it

**Healthcare Workers Care Network Helpline 0800 21 21 21
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