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The Urgent Need to Address Violence Against Health Workers During the COVID-19 Pandemic

To the Editor:

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global health threat with some experts arguing it is the most serious respiratory virus threat to public health since the 1918 influenza outbreak.¹ As of May 10, 2020, there have been 4,097,158 confirmed cases and 282,495 deaths worldwide.² COVID-19 has challenged our daily living, economic stability, and behaviors.

Health workers are the cornerstone of every health system. Health workers are at the front line of COVID-19 and are exposed to hazards that put their lives at risk. Hazards include pathogen exposure, long working hours, psychological distress, fatigue, and occupational burnout.³ Health workers experience stress and concern about transmitting the disease to family members and experience a constant sense of intense fear, stigmatization, and ostracism when treating patients with COVID-19.³ There is an urgent need to care for the wellbeing of health workers to prevent serious consequences for patients and a possible collapse in our health systems.

In contrast with other countries, health workers in Mexico are not always praised, and some experience discrimination, threats, and attacks.⁴ As of May 10, 2020, there have been 33,460

confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Mexico and 3353 reported deaths.² The growing number of COVID-19 cases in Mexico has brought with it a wave of violence against health workers who have wrongly been accused of spreading the disease.⁴ Some patients have been observed to purposely cough or spit on health care workers. Health workers, hospital administration, and government must exercise “zero tolerance” concerning violence against health workers.

Violence against health workers is a complex problem^{5–7} and there is a lack of rigorous research to address it.^{8,9} The current climate in Mexico and clear gaps in the literature strongly support the need for studies to understand, prevent, and address violence against health workers, especially in the context of infectious disease outbreaks.

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