

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the wellbeing of UK care home practitioners:

Executive summary

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has raised particular challenges for care homes, their residents and families, and the staff who look after them. The sector has been heavily impacted, with many care homes experiencing outbreaks and significant numbers of deaths amongst care home residents. Care home staff have also been shown to have a two-fold increased risk of mortality from the virus compared to the general population (The Health Foundation, 15 May 2020).

Many care home staff build strong and lasting relationships with care home residents, and the COVID-19 pandemic brought a significant increase in the volume and intensity of work for care staff, alongside rapidly changing practice guidelines (IPPO, March 2021). There is surprisingly little research on the impact of pandemics on the mental health and wellbeing of care home staff. Surveys conducted in 2020-1 by colleagues at Ulster University found that scores for self-reported wellbeing amongst UK social care staff decreased from summer 2020 to winter 2020-1, indicating increased rates of depression and anxiety amongst the staff group (McFadden et al., 2021).

This project evolved from work undertaken as part of the wider University of Exeter and Care Homes Knowledge Collaboration (ExCHANGE) project, which aims to work with local care homes and associated stakeholders to identify key research priorities in the sector. Care home staff and family members identified the wellbeing of care home staff as an area of key importance in the summer of 2020.

What we did

Between December 2020 and March 2021, we conducted 15 virtual interviews with care home staff from 15 care homes across England, varying in size, type and CQC rating. Those who were interviewed were Managers or staff in other senior roles or care positions. Ten of the care homes had experienced at least one outbreak of COVID-19, two had cases confirmed in staff only, and three had not had any confirmed cases by the time of the interview.

Based on our initial conversations with care home staff, we identified three key questions that the interviews would focus on, and organised our analysis based on these.

1. How has the pandemic affected the wellbeing of care home staff?
2. What has helped or maintained staff wellbeing during the pandemic?
3. What are employers doing to support the wellbeing of care home staff?

What we found

Figure 1 illustrates the key questions along with the themes identified from analysis of the interview transcripts. These themes are explored in the full report which accompanies this summary.

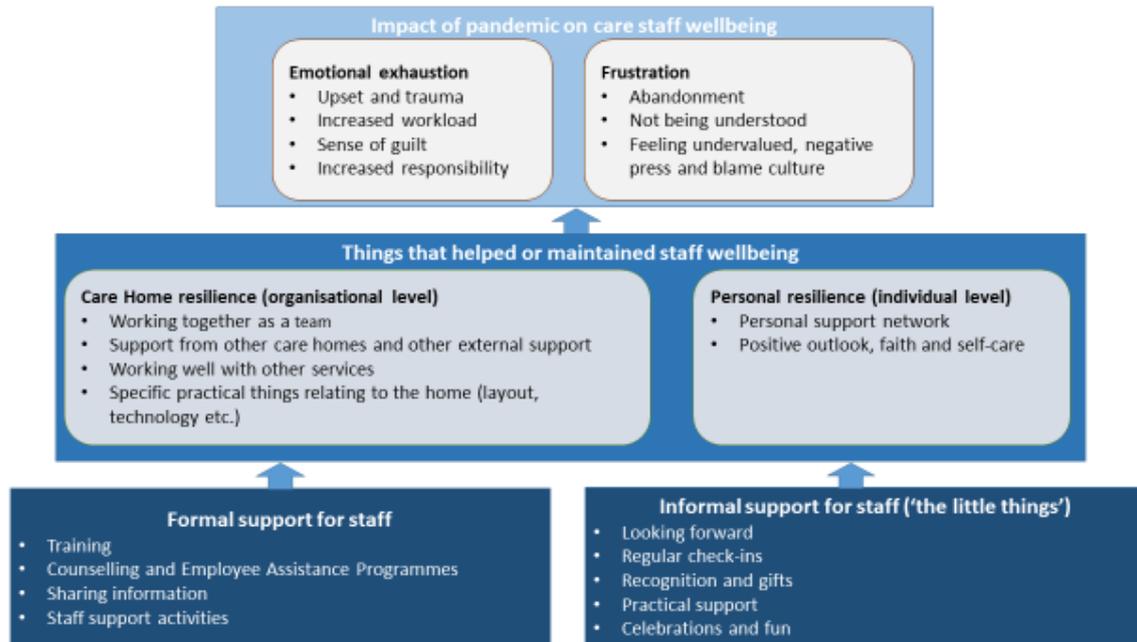


Figure 1. Key themes and sub-themes separated by research question

Five overarching themes:

Responsibility and guilt

There was an overwhelming sense of individual responsibility felt by the staff whom we interviewed, which led to increased levels of stress, anxiety and physical and emotional exhaustion; supporting staff, residents and residents' relatives, ensuring guidance was implemented, and increased workloads and working hours. There was also a sense of guilt that accompanied this responsibility. Adequate support is recommended to ensure that the burden of responsibility is shared, both in-house and with external sources, and that managers receive sufficient support, both practically and emotionally.

The importance of Recognition

Most of the staff we interviewed were disgruntled and frustrated by the lack of recognition they felt during the pandemic by other professionals, the government and the public. They thought that the media more often depicted care homes negatively and many were frustrated at the difference between how the NHS and adult social care were treated and viewed by the public. On the flip side, where staff felt valued and appreciated (internally by colleagues, and externally by professionals, relatives of care home residents and the local community), this was one of the things that staff felt helped with their wellbeing. Recognising the dedication and hard work of care home staff is important for staff morale, and ways in which to demonstrate this should be considered to ensure the wellbeing of those working in care homes.

Relationships

Many staff felt that they had been abandoned by the government, which did not provide adequate PPE soon enough. They also felt misunderstood. There was a mixture of experiences reported with regards to support from other professionals, but all staff felt that this external support was essential, and that those who received it reported benefiting greatly. Relationships with care home colleagues

and others working in the sector, as well as friends and relatives, were also mentioned as sources of support contributing towards their wellbeing. The majority of those interviewed commented that one of the silver linings of the pandemic had been that the care home team had really pulled together and had become closer. Recognition of the hard work of individuals and teams working in care homes and the provision of practical and emotional assistance where helpful are clear protective factors for not only the wellbeing of care home managers but also for the wider care home and its staff.

Resilience

Our interviewees described several things that promoted organisational and individual resilience: that is, things that maintain an individual's wellbeing or that of the wider care home staff team. These included having personal support networks, a supportive care home team, wider organisational support as well as that from residents' relatives and the wider community. Aiding individuals to build support networks and for care homes to become resilient is essential for the long term wellbeing of care home staff. Various structured programmes to support staff wellbeing as well as unstructured activities such as 'check-ins' were described by interviewees, but the impact of these on staff wellbeing is unknown.

Repair and Recovery

Care staff who worked in care homes in England during the COVID-19 pandemic experienced stressful and upsetting events. Whether a care home had an outbreak of COVID or not, the staff with whom we spoke described the experience of working during the pandemic as stressful and anxiety-provoking, and the experience was reported to be more difficult in homes in which many people died. Many staff thought there would be long-term effects on staff mental health, and some described impacts on their own physical health. It is important to make sure that staff working in care homes are provided with adequate practical and emotional support, and that lessons learnt from the pandemic are taken into consideration for the future.

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ExCHANGE project: <https://exchangecollaboration.wordpress.com/>