New Plans Focus on Health Care Workers' Mental Health

The US Surgeon General and the CDC's National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) are launching initiatives to address health care workers' growing mental health burden, according to experts who spoke during a panel discussion hosted by NIOSH.

COVID-19 has exacerbated the widespread burnout that already existed among the nation's 20 million health care workers, said NIOSH Director John Howard, MD. He cited several studies documenting these trends. For example, a survey of 1119 health care workers conducted from June through September 2020 found that 76% were experiencing exhaustion or burnout. Overall, about 22% of health care workers reported moderate depression or posttraumatic stress disorder during the pandemic, according to a recent review of studies from 21 countries that included about 97,000 health care workers.

In addition, a survey of 400 frontline nurses found that 22% have contemplated leaving their positions. Another survey of 6000 acute and critical care nurses found that 66% have considered leaving the profession because of their pandemic-related experiences. More than half of about 26,000 public health workers surveyed by the CDC in March and April 2021 reported having mental health symptoms.

US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, MD, MBA, said during the panel that he is working on an initiative to reduce clinicians' administrative burdens that contribute to burnout. Murthy said he's also drafting a blueprint that's intended to improve health care workers' mental health. Howard said NIOSH is building on its existing programs, including the Total Worker Health program, to better integrate primary prevention of mental health conditions for health care workers.

"We owe our health care workers and their families a debt of gratitude, but we also owe them a debt of action," Murthy said. "It's long past time we take care of those who take care of us."

Influenza Vaccination Increased During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Last year's efforts by public health authorities to ward off a "twindemic" of COVID-19 and influenza appear to have paid off in the form of increased flu vaccinations, according to a CDC report.

Recent data from 10 states and New York City show that overall, flu vaccinations increased by 9% during the last quarter of 2020 compared with the same time period in 2018 and 2019. Driving the increase were adolescents, who received about 13% more vaccine doses, and adults aged 18 to 64 years, whose vaccinations rose by about 15%. A more modest 9.5% increase occurred in those aged 65 years or older.

The number of doses administered to children and adolescents aged 5 to 12 years was similar during all 3 time periods, but it declined considerably among the youngest children in late 2020. Clinicians administered almost 14% fewer doses to infants and toddlers aged 6 to 24 months and 12% fewer to children aged 2 to 4 years during 2020's last quarter compared with the 2 previous flu seasons.

Data from the National Immunization Survey-Flu and the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System documented similar flu vaccination trends, the authors noted. They pointed out that even though it doesn't protect against COVID-19, influenza vaccination was part of a public health strategy during the 2020-2021 flu season to flatten the overall curve of respiratory illnesses, protect essential workers from the flu, and conserve medical resources for patients with COVID-19.

During the current flu season, "Influenza vaccination among all age groups could help reduce the spread of influenza...and reduce the potential burden that influenza cases could place on health care systems already overburdened by COVID-19," the authors wrote. — Bridget M. Kuehn, MSJ

Note: Source references are available through embedded hyperlinks in the article text online.