

Nursing Homes: The Overshadowed and Undervalued Aspects of Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

Every 100 years, some sort of infectious disease devastates the world. In 1720, we had the Plague, in 1817, Cholera, in 1918, the Spanish Flu, and now in 2020, we have the Coronavirus. The disease, having been first discovered in Wuhan, China, soon took the world by storm as more and more people fell ill to the contagious disease. Due to how new and unique the disease was, everyone was vulnerable to it. However, certain demographics were at a higher risk of being fatally affected by the disease. This being the elderly and young children. At the start of the pandemic, the entire world was focused on hospitals, how to quarantine patients, where to separately keep them, etc. The type of facility with the highest percentage of the elderly, however, are not in fact hospitals. The type of facility with the highest percentage of elderly is Nursing Homes, who were treated extremely differently to hospitals during the early portion of the pandemic. The goals of this project were to assess the mentality of those who were held responsible for the lives of those most at risk, and whether or not they believe they were given adequate support during the pandemic.

Introduction

What is Covid-19? Covid-19, also known as Coronavirus disease, is defined by the World Health Organization as an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Covid-19 can result in mild to moderate respiratory illness in those infected. Covid-19 was first reported within the United States on January 21st, 2020. Following that, in March, the country entered a nationwide shutdown and quarantine which persisted for the majority of the citizens until the latter end of 2022.

Donald M. Forthal (MD), states that the disease is 10 times as deadly as the seasonal flu, which has a .1% mortality rate. Compounding this is that it is a new virus, one that as of 2020, we had never seen before, and with its ease of spreading, all factors contributing to its danger. In comparison to SARS-CoV-1, the disease also latches onto cells more effectively and quickly, leading to a higher number of cases. The disease leads to respiratory issues such as severe damage to the lungs, heart damage, and more.

Forthal states that mortality increases with age, and that those most at risk are those above the age of 70. The prevalence of these diseases among the older generation is only worsened by pre-existing conditions they may already have. Relevant to this research is the fact that patients with dementia are likely to be unable to share any symptoms they may be having or be able to recognize any problems they may be experiencing.

Nursing Homes are home to a very high quantity of elderly patients. Many Nursing Homes also have Memory Care wards for those patients with dementia, making it even more vital that they remain Covid-19 free. With this information of Covid-19 being a dangerous disease that the elderly are more susceptible to, combined with the fact that Nursing Homes have a higher percentage of elderly patients, a reasonable conclusion would be that Nursing Homes would be given much support during the Pandemic. However, when asking staff at numerous nursing homes, their responses to that question tell a different story. The staff cited many reasons as to why they were or weren't successful at keeping their respective Nursing Homes Covid free. I

believe that making vital knowledge public as quickly as possible can allow Nursing homes to employ strategies such as immediate lockdown, elimination of direct contact between residents and visitors, and adherence to established protocols that can greatly assist a facility with high risk patients during times of a national crisis.

Methodology

The purpose of this experiment was to gather information on how Nursing Homes, places with a high amount of elderly patients, dealt with the Covid-19 situation. In order to perform this experiment, I picked two nursing homes with radically different success at remaining Covid free. One was Nursing Home A, which had remained Covid-19 free, the longest of any Nursing Home in the area, keeping out all cases until September of 2021. The other was Nursing Home B, which had gotten outbreaks of Covid-19 very quickly, and was the first in its area to have any cases. The Nursing Homes will be referred to as Nursing Home A and B in order to avoid any sort of backlash on them for their Covid management and for privacy. The distinct differences in success experienced by these two nursing homes made it evident that despite having many similarities, it was still possible to have such a drastic difference in success in relation to Covid.

In order to gather information to reach a conclusion, I sought out employees at each location who had been working at the locations during the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in approximately March of 2020 and onward. I proceeded to ask them the following questions to get a glimpse into what the mentality was for them during the start of Covid, and what policies they enacted that led the Nursing Homes to their respective outcomes:

1. What was your initial reaction to the covid outbreak?
2. What were your priorities when deciding what course of action to take?
3. What do you believe set your facility apart in terms of Covid Management?
4. How did the demographic of Nursing Home patients affect your course of action?
5. Do you feel that Nursing Homes were given adequate support during the pandemic?
6. I'm sure there were many families who didn't understand Covid or simply wanted to see their loved ones. How did you handle them while maintaining proper Covid protocols?
7. Which specific action/policy do you believe was the most impactful in helping deal with Covid-19
8. If you could go back in time with your current information, would you handle Covid any differently?

With these questions, I was able to learn why the Nursing Homes acted as they did and what exactly they did in order to reach the results they did.

The Nursing Home Reaction to Covid-19

With the widespread outbreak of Covid-19 in the United States, there was also widespread panic. Everyone was scared for their own safety and their loved ones, trying their best to remain safe from this pandemic. With a dangerous disease no one had seen becoming at the forefront of our lives, people were scared. They were panicking for themselves and their family. Nursing Homes were no different. In the interviews, when asked question number 1, about their initial reaction to the Covid pandemic, 16/20 respondents answered that their initial reaction was panic and fear. They felt scared for themselves, for their family and for their residents.

However, despite all the panic, Nursing Homes had a job to do, and they had to try and keep their elderly patients, who are more susceptible to Covid and have a higher mortality for the disease, safe. This led into the next question, which was aimed to find out what the initial objective was for Nursing Homes for their first course of action they took. All 20 responses include some sort of the interviewee stating they wanted to keep their residents safe and Covid free. So now we have two major points to look at, that staff were scared and fearful of the pandemic, but they still had a sense of duty and wanted to keep those they were responsible for safe.

So naturally, in these changing times, the Nursing Homes had to change as well, in order to account for this new infectious disease. Question 3 serves to ask what policies and what actions the staff believe were effective in managing Covid. For this question, the staff at Nursing Home A believe their policies of being transparent with their residents and their families, actually strictly adhering to Covid protocols, and maintaining strict isolation for the residents was key to their successful management of Covid. On the other hand, Nursing Home B believes that they had a severe lack of information available to them in regards to Covid, and to Nursing Homes in general, which meant they couldn't take the steps they felt necessary in order to safely remain Covid free. Their goal was the same as Nursing Home A's, but they believe they couldn't act as quickly in order to ensure some modicum of success since they didn't know what exactly they were dealing with.

The Focus On Hospitals and Not Nursing Homes

During Covid, there was a high amount of focus and attention on hospitals. Everyone was discussing how hospitals were running out of Personal Protective Equipment(PPE), how they were short staffed and more. Meanwhile Nursing Homes, despite having a higher demographic of elderly patients, who we have already stated to be more likely to suffer mortality as a result of the disease, seemingly were pushed under the table and not given the appropriate support by the government and the media.

The staff agree with this point themselves. 16 out of the 20 responses stated that they believe Nursing Homes were not given adequate support during the pandemic. A common response was that they lacked financial support and had a shortage of employees. The two respondents who believe that Nursing Homes were given adequate support stated that they were given enough funding to manage resources. However, a common argument by those who said "no" in regards to question 5 was that even if they were given funding, a lot of people were quitting their jobs at the start of Covid due to fear of death. This led to heavy under-staffing at healthcare facilities on a national level. The main argument is that the money given to Nursing Homes was rendered significantly less impactful and effective due to a shortage of staff to utilize it. Even if they were given substantial funds, if the manpower to enforce policies and utilize the equipment wasn't there, then there wasn't much point to it.

The majority of respondents agreed that more funding, and some sort of action taken by the government to address the issue of short staffed facilities would have had a substantial combined effect, instead of simply doing one with mediocrity and directing most of the focus to hospitals. A major reason for this mismatch of support is likely due to a lack of reporting on Nursing Homes. As mentioned prior, a lot of the focus was on hospitals, and how they fared at the start of Covid. Due to this, it makes sense the government and other powerful entities would choose to prioritize hospitals, as that was what the public was learning about by these news channels and articles. 8 of the 20 responses specifically state that they believe hospitals were given significantly more attention than Nursing Home facilities, which had a bevy of effects. For one, many families of patients were significantly less aware of what was going on in Nursing Homes, and assumed they had the same situation as hospitals, when in fact they were receiving marginally less funding, equipment, and had extreme staff shortages. That combined with a lack of information led to events such as Nursing Home B using cloth masks and reusing equipment due to a lack of knowledge and available equipment, which they believe directly contributed to them having a Covid outbreak so quickly.

Conclusion

Covid-19 was something that no one was prepared for, for many healthcare facilities, it was equivalent to a normal human stepping into the ring with Mike Tyson. It was scary, dangerous, and you had no idea what to do next. The thing that separated Nursing Home A's success versus Nursing Home B's rather quick outbreaks

was seemingly the deliberate actions that Nursing Home A took. Their quick shutdown and isolation of the facility, adherence to policies, and numerous information sessions to educate staff and families they believe was pivotal to maintaining everyone's safety. Nursing Home B on the other hand was also scared and uncertain, but they didn't act with as much prudence or have enough knowledge of the situation to have effective policies. It may seem simple now to look back in hindsight and point out their flaws, but in a time of national crisis, constantly quitting staff, and a lack of proper equipment, all combined to create a situation that was extremely difficult for Nursing Homes nationally to deal with. Some managed to work their way out of the situation such as Nursing Home A did, and others couldn't keep up and didn't know how to catch up.

These conclusions come from what the staff of each Nursing Home had to say, but that doesn't mean they are the only cause for why what happened to Nursing Homes happened how it did. There are of course a few limitations to this study. For one, it addresses two Nursing Homes in a similar area to each other in order to make a comparison between two distinct results with very similar environmental factors. This means that issues suffered by Nursing Homes in other parts of the country may be different to what circumstances experienced here. Another is that only 20 total respondents were interviewed, meaning that there could be more reasons and ideas other staff had that were not taken into consideration. However the reason for this was that the respondent choice was filtered to be those employed at the Nursing Home as of March of 2020, and those who were available during the days of the interviews, as in healthcare facilities it is common for some staff to only visit once a week or once a month depending on their specific job.

In the end though, Covid was a disaster that affected the whole world, and was the first ever situation of its magnitude in many of our lifetimes. It was inevitable for a lot to be unknown and a lot that could be changed. Despite not having all the information, Nursing Homes still tried their best for themselves and their facility, and that is something to commend and respect.

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