

# RESEARCH CONNECTION

## Impacts of Covid-19 on rural health care workers in Manitoba

By Kyrra Rauch, B.A. (Hons) & Margaret de Jager, B.A.



### Why this research is important

COVID-19 is a global pandemic and its impacts are far reaching. This research is important as it examines the impacts of the pandemic on the mental health of frontline health care workers that are doing all they can to protect society from COVID-19. Focusing on rural health care workers is also important as rural areas are often underserved.

### How the research was conducted

Data was collected using an online survey over a one-month period from May to June 2020 (n= 137). Primarily

### What you need to know

This pilot study examines the mental health impacts of COVID-19 on frontline healthcare workers during the initial stages of the pandemic response in rural Manitoba, Canada. It is one stage of a larger project examining the impacts of COVID-19 on rural people and places. The research is undertaken through the Centre for Critical Studies of Rural Mental Health at Brandon University.

nurses (including psychiatric, licensed, and practical) responded to the survey that included questions assessing symptoms of anxiety as well as strategies and barriers to addressing mental health concerns. The questionnaire also employed the Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD-7) scale to assess anxiety. Developed and validated in primary care by Spitzer et al., the Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7-item Scale is an efficient, self-report scale that has been shown to be a reliable and valid measure of clinical symptoms of anxiety.

### What the researchers found

The initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in Manitoba had negative effects on the mental wellbeing of rural frontline health care workers. In communities of less than 10,000 people, analysis showed that nearly ¼ of health care workers that responded to the survey reported

moderate to severe levels of anxiety. Health care workers mostly accessed informal supports, such as family and friends, and they reported numerous barriers to accessing formal mental health support. Frequent barriers reported included fatigue, not having time to seek support, and fear of judgement. As the number of barriers experienced trying to access resources increased, GAD-7 scores also significantly increased.

Health care workers identified a wide array of coping strategies they used to support their mental health and well-being during the initial stages of the pandemic. Common coping strategies included eating regularly, having a good sleep routine, and exercising. It is also important to address potentially negative strategies reported such as increased consumption of substances such as alcohol, tobacco, and cannabis through the provision of other complementary supports. Importantly, those who reported using more coping strategies displayed lower GAD-7 scores. This finding speaks of the importance of providing and supporting positive coping strategies in the workplace, community, and at home.

### How this research can be used

This research provides a baseline for future research on the impacts of COVID-19 on frontline health care and other workers. People are resilient in the face of adversity, however, there are limits. The researchers hope that these and other findings reported elsewhere, will be used by government agencies and governing bodies to improve workplaces and thereby increasing safety, quality of life, and service delivery.

### About the researchers

Kyrra Rauch is a recent graduate, B.A. (Hons) in Psychology, and research assistant for the CCSRMH. Margaret de Jager, B.A. (Psychology), is a student in the Department of Psychiatric Nursing and research assistant. Doug Ramsey is a professor in the Department of Rural Development. [Ramsey@Brandonu.ca](mailto:Ramsey@Brandonu.ca)

Rachel Herron is an associate professor in the Department of Geography and Environment. [HerronR@Brandonu.ca](mailto:HerronR@Brandonu.ca)

Breanna Lawrence is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Psychology and Student Services. [LawrenceB@Brandonu.ca](mailto:LawrenceB@Brandonu.ca)

Candice Waddell is an assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatric Nursing. [WaddellC@Brandonu.ca](mailto:WaddellC@Brandonu.ca)

Nancy Newall is an associate professor in the Department of Psychology. [NewallN@Brandonu.ca](mailto:NewallN@Brandonu.ca)

### Keywords

Healthcare workers, mental health, nursing, pandemic, rural

### Publications based on research

Ramsey, D., Lawrence, B., Rauch, K., Herron, R., Waddell, C., Newall, N., & de Jager, M. (2021). COVID-19 and mental health: Impacts of a pandemic on rural healthcare workers in Manitoba. Manuscript submitted for publication.

Waddell, C., de Jager, M., Herron, R., Ramsey, D., Rauch, K., Lawrence, B., & Newall, N. (2021). Examining rural healthcare workers' needs and experiences during COVID-19. Manuscript submitted for publication.

### Acknowledgements

Funding for the research was provided through the Canada Research Chair Program. The researchers thank the frontline health care workers for their participation in this research, and more importantly, their dedication to service.

Research Connection is a periodical publication intended to provide information about the impact of Brandon University's academic research and expertise on public policy, social programming, and professional practice. This summary is supported by the Office of Research Services and by the Centre for Aboriginal and Rural Education Studies, Faculty of Education.

Editor: Christiane Ramsey [RamseyC@Brandonu.ca](mailto:RamseyC@Brandonu.ca)  
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