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Covid-19: Impact of long term symptoms will be profound, warns BMA

Abi Rimmer

A third of doctors have treated patients with long term covid-19 symptoms, including chronic fatigue and anosmia, a survey conducted by the BMA has found.

Richard Vautrey, chair of the BMA's GP committee for England, said it was clear that the long term impact of covid-19 on patients and the NHS would be profound. An online survey of doctors conducted by the association between 6 and 12 August received 4279 responses.¹ Of the 3729 doctors who answered a question about patients' symptoms, around a third (1092) said that they had seen or treated patients with symptoms they believed to be a long term effect of the patient having had covid-19. The symptoms reported included chronic fatigue, muscle weakness, loss of sense of smell, and concentration difficulties.

"With more patients presenting with conditions as the result of infection, it's essential that sufficient capacity is in place to support and treat them," Vautrey said. "With the growing backlog of non-covid-19 treatment, the likelihood of a season flu outbreak, and the possibility of a second wave of infections we need to see a more comprehensive long term plan to enable doctors to care for their patients this winter and beyond."

The survey also asked doctors about their own experiences of covid-19. Of the 4120 who responded to the question, 63% said they did not believe they had contracted the virus, 12% had had a diagnosis of covid-19 confirmed by testing, and 14% believed they had been infected with the virus.

David Strain, co-chair of the BMA's medical academic staff committee, said that while it was not surprising that medical staff have experienced high rates of infection it was still not acceptable. "The increasing evidence that covid-19 patients can suffer long lasting symptoms, irrespective of the severity of the initial infection, requires detailed study to understand what optimum treatment would be and, preferably, how to prevent it occurring in the first place," he said.

"Until this is known, it is imperative that the government and the NHS does more to protect the medical community from infection."

Strain said that the NHS could not afford more failures of quality and supply in personal protective equipment. "Risk assessments should be available to all working in the NHS and appropriate steps should be put in place to mitigate the risk of catching the virus, even in those that have a low risk of a bad outcome from the initial infection," he said.

¹ BMA. Covid-19: analysing the impact of coronavirus on doctors. 14 July 2020. www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/covid-19/what-the-bma-is-doing/covid-19-analysing-the-impact-of-coronavirus-on-doctors.

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