London

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2020;371:m3942<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m3942>

Published: 10 October 2020

Covid-19: Study to assess pandemic's effects on wellbeing of NHS staff

Jacqui Wise

A research project looking at the effects of the covid-19 pandemic on the psychological health and wellbeing of NHS staff in England has received £530 000 in government funding.

The NHS Check study is one of six research projects to share £2m from UK Research and Innovation and the National Institute for Health Research. Three of the projects will look at the effects of the pandemic on children and younger adults, and two studies will focus on people with serious mental health problems.

NHS Check (<https://www.nhscheck.org>) is led by Simon Wessely, professor of psychological medicine at King's College London. He told *The BMJ* that the study started in April in King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust "on a shoestring" but that the new funding meant it could now be expanded to 18 other trusts. Everyone on the payroll at each of the trusts, including doctors, nurses, cleaners, and security guards, will be contacted.

The study will use a combination of online questionnaires carried out at regular intervals and more detailed interviews with a smaller group of participants. It also hopes to assess the myriad support systems that are in place in different trusts. A sister study will focus particularly on the pandemic's effects on NHS workers from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Wessely said that although several surveys have reported negative effects of the pandemic on the mental health of healthcare workers "most were rubbish with poor response rates." He told *The BMJ*, "Overall mental health has deteriorated during the pandemic, and healthcare workers are not immune to that. But we don't know if it is as bad as some studies seem to be saying."

He added that healthcare workers had reported positive aspects of working during the pandemic, including increased cohesion, leadership, teaching, and supervision.

One study, which will receive £495 000, will evaluate an online cognitive behavioural therapy programme for children aged 5-12 years who have anxiety. The study will assess whether an online programme is an effective alternative to face-to-face provision by child and adolescent mental health services, which were already struggling to cope with increased demand before the pandemic.

Cathy Cresswell, from the University of Oxford, who is leading the study, told a Science Media Centre briefing on 9 October: "The pandemic has caused high levels of disruption and uncertainty for young people. Anxiety among primary school age children has increased because they are concerned about

friends and family becoming unwell and potentially dying." She added that secondary school children tended to have more online contact with their peers than younger children, which may mean they feel less isolated.

Two other studies will use existing cohorts to assess covid-19's effects. One will use a cohort of 2000 people aged 14-17 previously recruited for the Resilience, Ethnicity and Adolescent Health (REACH) research project to understand which groups of young people were most likely to experience mental health problems as a result of the pandemic. The other study will work with a cohort of 5000 Londoners aged 15-17 who are taking part in the Study of Cognition, Adolescents and Mobile Phones (SCAMP), which has been collecting data on young people's mental health and use of digital technology since 2014. It will examine whether changes in use of digital technology during the pandemic have had an impact on adolescents' mental health.

A further study run by the University of Manchester will look at rates of self-harm, GP referrals for mental health treatment, and the risks of suicide and early death before, during, and after the first covid-19 peak. And a study from the University of York will look at how people with severe mental ill health experience the social restrictions placed on them by the pandemic

Ottoline Leyser, chief executive of UK Research and Innovation, commented, "Covid-19 has brought challenges for us all, with frontline workers facing unprecedented pressure, and many others, including children and people with existing mental health issues, struggling with the anxiety and loneliness that come with social distancing measures. These studies will help us identify the people most at risk so that support can be targeted where it is most needed during this difficult time."