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Examining the Employment Effect of COVID-19 in the Healthcare Field

Dr. Turck:

The COVID-19 pandemic has stretched our healthcare resources thin. Struggling through longer hours and the risk of exposure, healthcare professionals are facing more challenges than ever before. So, how have these challenges impacted compensation and employment in the healthcare field?

You're listening to *COVID-19: On The Frontlines* on ReachMD. I'm Dr. Charles Turck. And joining me today to talk about healthcare workforce changes during the COVID-19 pandemic is Dr. Thuy Nguyen, a Research Assistant Professor and Health Economist in the Department of Health Management and Policy in the Center for Evaluating Health Reform at the University of Michigan School of Public Health.

Dr. Nguyen, welcome to the program.

Dr. Nguyen:

Thank you. Thank you for the invitation. I'm really excited to be here.

Dr. Turck:

Well, let's begin by level-setting our understanding of this topic. Dr. Nguyen, based on your experience, how do you think the healthcare workforce has changed?

Dr. Nguyen:

Well, we entered the third year of the COVID-19 pandemic, and this pandemic has been affecting the whole population's health and various sectors of the economy, including the healthcare sector. Many hospitals and physicians' offices report lower staffing ratios because of increased challenges for healthcare facilities to recruit and retain healthcare workers. Despite the added burden of the pandemic, healthcare wages did not keep pace with other industries during COVID. These issues may be more severe for healthcare employees at nursing homes. Recently, the White House has announced a set of nursing home reforms, including minimum staffing standard. To achieve the goals of these reforms, I think we need further support for healthcare employees.

Dr. Turck:

Now, let's dive into your research. Can you tell us a little bit about your study and its purpose?

Dr. Nguyen:

Absolutely. While there has been recent extensive media coverage of the considerable employment declines in the healthcare sector, evidence for national data employment and wages is limited, so our study aims to provide a data-driven picture of employment levels by various healthcare settings, and we try to help guide decision-making. Using the census data of employment, we can track what happened to wages and employment levels at various healthcare facilities before and during the pandemic. We also want to identify the healthcare settings and geographic areas that are more vulnerable to job losses during the pandemic.

Dr. Turck:

With that in mind, Dr. Nguyen, would you walk us through the results of your study? What were some of your team's key findings?

Dr. Nguyen:

Sure. We found that healthcare employment levels declined in mid-2020 down 5.2 percent from 2019 data. Our findings highlight the varying patterns of certain employment losses in mid-2020 and recoveries by mid-2021 by various types of healthcare facilities. Specifically, the largest declines during the first year of the pandemic took place among dental offices and skilled nursing facilities. At the

same time, we observed that wages in healthcare sector increased at a lower rate related to the national average.

Dr. Turck:

For those just tuning in, you're listening to *COVID-19: On The Frontlines* on ReachMD. I'm Dr. Charles Turck, and I'm speaking with Dr. Thuy Nguyen about her research on healthcare wages during the COVID-19 pandemic timeframe.

Let's dive into some of these key findings a little further. Dr. Nguyen, what do these declining employment rates tell us about the current state of healthcare?

Dr. Nguyen:

This is a great question. We found substantial employment declines among nursing homes even during the second year of the pandemic, and the declines were more severe in geographic areas with high COVID-19 burden. This pattern is different from other type of healthcare facilities, including hospitals and physicians' offices. So this finding suggests that efforts to protect the most vulnerable frontline workers may be not adequate. We also saw that the largest wage increase being within nursing homes may imply that these employees and other healthcare workers have shouldered a heavy burden of fighting the COVID-19 pandemic for two years, including fears from becoming sick, burnout from increased patient burdens and other disruptions.

Dr. Turck:

And as a quick follow-up to that, are there any other challenges leading to this decline in employment?

Dr. Nguyen:

As I mentioned earlier, many hospitals and healthcare facilities are facing increased challenge for them to recruit and retain healthcare workers. Poor pay and increased burnout are key challenges leading to this employment decline.

Dr. Turck:

Before we close, Dr. Nguyen, what are some ways we might overcome these obstacles and improve employment rates for healthcare facilities?

Dr. Nguyen:

Well, given these challenges and current price increases, wage growth is a good start, but more money is needed to improve other benefits and working conditions for many frontline healthcare workers. It is important to focus on the effect of this current pandemic and future pandemics on healthcare employment levels and wages especially if we want to prevent healthcare worker shortage in the future.

Dr. Turck:

Well, we could definitely delve into this topic even further, but that's all the time that we have for today. I want to thank my guest, Dr. Thuy Nguyen, for sharing her research and insights into healthcare employment amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Dr. Nguyen, thank you for speaking with me today.

Dr. Nguyen:

My pleasure. It was nice to be here.

Dr. Turck:

For ReachMD, I'm Dr. Charles Turck. To access this and other episodes in our series, visit reachmd.com/covid19, where you can Be Part of the Knowledge. Thanks for listening.