

Abstract title: Exploring the lived experiences of medical doctors on duty during level 5 lockdown at a hospital in the Gauteng province, South Africa.

The 2019 novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic placed unprecedented strain on healthcare systems globally, with medical doctors facing heightened risks and uncertainty, particularly during its early stages. In the early days of the pandemic, healthcare workers were required to respond to a life-threatening and poorly understood disease, which resulted in considerable concern within the public healthcare sector. The study explored the lived experiences of medical doctors working at a hospital in the Gauteng province during the COVID-19 pandemic Level 5 lockdown. A qualitative, exploratory, and phenomenological approach was employed to gain in-depth insight into the participants' experiences. Purposive sampling was used to select seven participants who met the inclusion criteria. Data was collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic content analysis. The Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping guided the study in understanding how participants appraised and managed stressors related to the pandemic. Five major themes emerged from the findings, including the challenges and risks of treating COVID-19-positive patients and the psychological impact of the pandemic. Participants perceived the pandemic as a significant threat, reporting challenges such as limited knowledge, resource constraints, and staff shortages. Moreover, the study highlighted the profound psychological impact of the pandemic on participants, characterised by intense fear and anxiety. Participants reported various coping mechanisms, including prayer, support systems, acceptance, and meditation, to manage stress during the pandemic. Furthermore, these findings highlight the importance of early interventions during pandemics or public health emergencies. In particular, the provision of mental health support services is critical in mitigating the psychological burden experienced by healthcare workers.

Keywords: COVID-19, experiences, medical doctors, hospital healthcare workers, psychological impact