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Executive Summary of the Survey of Occupational Health Nurses

March 23, 2022

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Working as an Occupational Health Nurse during the COVID-19 pandemic has been a challenging experience. With the assistance and support from the American Board for Occupational Health Nurses, Lisa Hunwardsen, a student in the Occupational and Environmental Health Nursing program, created a survey for Occupational Health Nurses to see how the OHN career has been impacted by the pandemic.

In September 2021 a survey was sent to approximately 5,500 Occupational Health Nurses (OHN) within the United States and Canada. A second survey was sent to the OHN's employers. The two surveys demonstrate the value of OHNs within the workplace, their ability to adapt to the needs of the employer during a global pandemic, assisting with new workplace practices and creating policies and communications for employees to support safety and well-being in the workplace. The two surveys additionally show the way the OHN's work responsibilities and personal well-being have been impacted by the pandemic.

Basic Demographics for the survey respondents:

- 565 completed the OHN survey and 30 employers completed their survey.
- 67% of the OHNs that took the survey were certified for their profession.
- 478 of the survey participants live in the US, 30 in Canada, and 10 stated other.
- 35% of OHNs state they work for manufacturing or production, and 25% state they work for a Hospital or Medical center.
- 62% of the respondents were between the ages of 46 – 65.
- 84.7% of the respondents were white.
- 3.3% identified as Black or African American.
- 90% describe themselves as female.
- 67% responded that they work > 40 hours per week.

Interesting Findings:

Comparing questions within the categories of prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, during the COVID-19 pandemic* and 18 months after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was discovered that OHNs experienced many different job changes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead of focusing on work-related injuries or medical surveillance, the pandemic asked the OHNs to switch their focus to illness assessment treatment and triage, or education about infection control, in addition to return to work coordination for workers. Guiding policies for infectious disease and contact tracing became a new role



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for OHNs and was indicated by their employers as the most significant contribution that OHNs made during the pandemic. However, this forced more traditional roles of the OHN, like medical surveillance, to take a backseat. OHNs who normally work independently to guide employee health and safety were suddenly drawn into frequent meetings with management or outside agencies to help guide new policies and procedures for the employer.

Key Findings:

- The survey uncovered the need for more pandemic planning.
 - 49% of the OHNs stated that they had a pandemic plan prior to the onset of the pandemic.
 - 28% stated they did not have a pandemic plan prior to the pandemic.
- 65% of OHNs stated that they frequently or often felt overwhelmed during the pandemic.
 - Only approximately 28% of the OHNs felt frequently supported by their employers.
- 18.5% of OHNs stated that they did see an increase in threats of violence during the pandemic.
 - 45% of those stating they saw an increase worked in businesses with more than 2,500 employees.
- The importance of the OHN is shown in the question that asked the percentage of individual workers that the OHN helped in any way with their health or well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - The average answer was they helped 62% of employees.

Additional significant findings:

When asking the OHNs what they would like to change now that they have worked during the COVID-19 pandemic, the greatest number of answers related to needing additional help with their job duties. Many OHNs continue to work long hours, working more than 40 hours per week, and continue to have additional job duties related to guiding policy for infectious disease and contact tracing. Attending more meetings with management per week also has added to the OHN responsibilities. The nurses state they would like to have better pay and feel more respected by their employers. The nurses would like more opportunity to guide decisions and policy in the workplace. OHNs state that they continue to work long hours, continue to be required to be on call 24/7, and they would like to see an improvement in work/life balance. Many OHNs work alone and would like a way to connect with their peers from other



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workplaces. Developing a network for OHNs to connect, share resources and support each other is an idea for a way to improve the OHN role going forward. OHNs also suggest creating a shared call center to handle the COVID-19 questions and guide return to work for employees. Policies and procedures for contact tracing, for testing, and for return to work could be developed and shared among businesses and employers, instead of each company spending valuable time and resources trying to develop their own. This would allow OHNs to have more time for traditional duties like medical surveillance.

Results from the employer surveys show that the employers value their OHNs. When asked “what are one or two significant contributions that the OHN provided to the business?”, the number one answer was advising leadership and employees on CDC guidelines. They also appreciated the OHN’s help with sick calls and helping with employee return to work guidance, providing education and well-being support, providing COVID-19 testing and vaccinations, and illness and case management. When asked, “how often did you contact the OHN with questions or concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic?”, 70% of employers answered frequently. When we asked the employer if there has been a return on investment for the OHN services, 80% answered yes. Business sectors that were represented in the employer survey are hospital or medical centers, manufacturing, government, utilities, and consulting.

*During the COVID-19 pandemic refers to March 2020 – August 2021 for the purposes of this survey