School Nurses have High Moral Distress Related to COVID-19 School Case Management

Purpose
This study aimed to investigate and describe Colorado school nurses' lived experience and moral distress as they combat COVID-19 case management and outbreaks in the school setting.

Background
The school environment has been a tumultuous setting with no universal guidelines or policies for masking, outbreaks, and in-person or online learning in Colorado and nationally. The global approval of the COVID-19 vaccine for children 5-11 years old in November has added to the confusion. School nurses have forged ahead as the primary health case manager and communicator in the schools, experiencing possible heightened moral distress from being caught in the middle between school administrators, parents, government, and public health systems.

Methods
- Descriptive mixed-methods study
- REDCap survey distribution during virtual CO School Nurse conference
- Key informant interviews by Zoom
- Descriptive statistics conducted
- Preliminary qualitative data theme emergence

Results
Eighty-three R.N.s (81.4%) responded: mostly older, female, white, non-Hispanic, and BSN educated. The largest majority (57.9%) had caseloads exceeding 900 students and practiced in suburban (49.4%), urban (34.6%), & rural (16.0%) settings. Preliminary qualitative interviews conducted with four school nurses found inconsistencies in outbreak and masking policies between districts and even between schools in the same district. A main emerging theme is "I am not the mask police."

There was a skewed distribution on the Moral Distress Thermometer scale with most school nurses reporting scores of 5 (distressing) to 10 (worst possible).

Discussion
We completed this study to understand school nurses’ moral distress amid the pandemic. This was done at a critical moment of our U.S. pandemic history, as vaccine approvals were considered for children aged 5-11 years. School nurses reported higher levels of moral distress in distressing to worst possible levels on the Moral Distress Thermometer scale. The only pre-pandemic study of school nurses’ moral distress using the same scale in another state found high moral distress at the 5-10 level (49.6%) but was lower compared to the (56.2%) in this study (Powell et al., 2018).

In this study, preliminary interviews confirmed that school nurses’ perceptions of moral distress were higher than pre-pandemic levels. This heightened moral distress resulted from school nurses trying to provide a safe environment for students and staff by following recommended public health guidelines meanwhile being treated as the unwelcome enforcers by parents and sometimes staff.

Our findings support the need for universal guidelines and support for the emotional health needs of school nurses who have been particularly engaged in trying times on the pandemic "front."

References

“I Am Not the Mask Police”: Colorado School Nurses’ Moral Distress Related to the COVID-19 Pandemic