

Continuing care and COVID-19: failure...or fortitude?

June 3, 2020

Long-term care has been considered by some to be this country's greatest failure with the majority of deaths occurring among residents of continuing care homes (which include nursing homes, long-term care and supportive living facilities). A May 14th article from the Canadian Medical Association Journal estimated that 62% - 82% of deaths due to COVID-19 in Canada have occurred among residents of continuing care homes. Are long-term care facilities failures?

I have spoke with two employees who work in long-term care in Calgary based facilities. What does this say about them? Are they failures? Are those deaths in some way their fault? We are creating a society of isolation, fear, and blame. When a death or an outbreak occurs, we look for fault. We are fixated on blaming when we should focused on supports and improved protocol to reduce spread.

The Calgary Herald published "One more Albertan dies of COVID-19 as Brentwood outbreak worsens... The 13th death with at least 69 residents and staff having tested positive at a single site." The employees I spoke with said this article "gives some numbers but does not indicate the conditions, the work load, and lack of adherence to protection and protocol. We have a storage room full of N95 masks which we are not allowed to use because the government has not mandated it. You would think, given they can't get a handle on the outbreak, management would bump-up worker protection. I am continuously reporting the lack of social distancing. It is a nightmare."

I am an Intensive Care Physician and these employees who work in long-term care have seen more COVID-19 than I have. The Canadian Medical Association Journal article also states "Many deaths could have been prevented if the same amount of effort that was put into preparing the hospital sector for COVID-19 had also been spent on preparing the continuing care sector." Continuing care employees have a far greater risk of exposure by working with elderly and cognitively impaired individuals who are unable to social distance, limited access to PPE and a lack of pandemic training. Their pay does not reflect the level of risk and they are non-unionized. These employees risk losing their jobs if they speak out.

Death is not the only negative result of the COVID-19 outbreak. We focus on the numbers but the real tragedy is that people are dying alone. Visitation was prohibited and now is severely limited. I have an elderly uncle who is awaiting placement in a long-term care facility. I would like to see him before he dies or cannot remember who I am, but I am not allowed. My aunt is only permitted to see him once per week through a glass barrier. We need to explore options that allow family members to safely see each other to connect loved ones again. Our loved ones need a quality of life too. I fear he will die alone.

The Edmonton Zone Medical Staff Association has been looking for a "feel good story" among all the pandemic tragedy to lift our spirits. While this story is not exactly what we were looking for I do see a silver lining in the long-term care workers. These individuals who, despite the obstacles of attending to vulnerable elderly residents every day, show courage and determination. They have done an excellent job with the resources and work conditions they have. They are certainly more "front line" than I have been. I thank them for their dedication, spirit and bravery.

Dr. Erika MacIntyre, Vice-President, Edmonton Zone Medical Staff Association