

# Caring for the elderly in the COVID-19 pandemic: Experiences from residential care workers in Hong Kong

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# Introduction

- The first recorded confirmed case of COVID-19 on 23 Jan 2020 and around 12670 test positive cases so far in Hong Kong.  
(HKSAR, 2022)
- Hong Kong has had a relatively small number of confirmed COVID-19 cases and deaths per million people compared to other developed economies, especially in the Residential Care Homes for the Elderly (RCHE) setting (Lum et al., 2020; Lam et al, 2020).
- RCHE's 'Care crisis' in the pandemic: the pandemic has disrupted regular care provision and imposed new requirements in RCHE, making it more challenging for frontline residential care workers to provide quality care to the elderly (McGilton, 2020; Grabowski and Mor, 2020)

# Background

- Visiting restriction :
  - i. Restriction of number of visitors
  - ii. Complete two doses of COVID-19 vaccination
  - iii. Obtain a negative COVID-19 results within 72 hours before the visit if not yet fully vaccinated.
- Restriction on residents' 'home leave' policy
- Compulsory testing for staff members of RCHEs, RCHDs and nursing homes
- The Outreach Vaccination Arrangement for Residential Care Homes (RCHs) under the COVID-19 started on 13 April 2021.
- Other preventive measures, e.g. temperature checking, medical surveillance, mask wearing, maintaining personal and environmental hygiene, social distancing...

# Aim and objectives

- **Research aim:**
  - To explore the experiences of residential care workers who provided frontline care service to the elderly during the pandemic in Hong Kong.
- **Research objectives:**
  - To understand residential care workers' working experiences under the COVID-19 pandemic
  - To explicate residential care workers' perspectives of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their work
  - To unravel how residential care workers adapt to and cope with the RCHE 'care crisis' under the pandemic

# Significance

- For future planning or adjustment on the arrangement of the residential care workers' in RCHEs under COVID-19 or novel infectious agents.
- Implications on the long-term care policy in Hong Kong

# Methods

- Qualitative Study
- Setting and research participants:
  - 6 RCHEs
  - 30 health care workers
    - Registered Nurses (n=5)
    - Enrolled Nurses (n=8)
    - Health Workers (n=8)
    - Personal Care Workers (n=9)
- Sampling: convenience, snowball sampling
- Data collection:
  - Followed infection control guideline of the RCHE and the government strictly
  - Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews
  - Conducted from March to December 2021
- Data analysis: thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006)

## Results: 4 themes

1. *Seeking resilience during challenging times*
2. *Increasing workload under the pandemic*
3. *Striking a balance between residents' psychosocial needs and the prevention of COVID-19*
4. *Building up a stronger relationships with elders*

## Results:

### Theme 1: *Seeking resilience during challenging times*

- Psychological stresses
  - Perceived RCHE as a high risk setting
  - Concern about the risk of infection and transmission
  - Lack of institutional support (i.e. clear guideline and financial support of prevention measures)
- Resilience
  - The pandemic disrupted existing care service in RCHE
  - Adapting to challenges imposed by the pandemic and improvised new modes of care provision over time



'... We had stress but became happy again soon. We have held many activities. We held Lunar New Year fair. We sought happiness in our small world. We also held Christmas parties and had four persons per table for both staffs and residents. It is a challenge for us to figure out how to cope with the adversity.'

「...應該講係壓力啦，但係好快又好開心啦。我地呢度搞過好多野架，我地又搞過年宵啦，係個小世界入面尋開心咯，我地又搞聖誕party啦，但嗰陣時就四人一臺啦，員工、院友都搞，逆境之中點樣面對呢，真係就係要考驗我地。」

(Case 18, RN)

## Results:

### Theme 2: *Increasing workload under the pandemic*

- Residential care workers' report that they have experienced substantially increased workload in the pandemic, especially for frontline personal care workers
  - Disease prevention and control measures
    - Maintaining personal hygiene of residents and themselves
    - Providing extra-care for residents discharged from hospital (i.e. take shower, quarantine, medical surveillance)
  - Challenges posed by visit restriction
    - Dealing with family's distrust and concern
    - Personal care that used to be shared by family members is now taken by residential care workers' alone (i.e. feeding, hair drying, nail cutting...)

We have to wear PPE and protect ourselves. It takes more work. Because [we] have to work one by one and need to change PPE for every room [we] enter. This takes more work. For those [residents] in quarantine, [we] don't need to bath them. [We] have to clear their bodies instead. This takes more work too.

「我地要著防護衣咯，我地要做足保護自己個啲工作咯，所以咪吃力啲咯。因為你逐個逐個，入去一次你就需要換一個，個啲咁你咪會覺得吃力啲咯。個啲隔離個啲你又唔使幫佢地沖涼，咁你就幫佢地抹身咯，個啲咁就吃力啲咯。」

(Case 8, PCW)

# Results:

## Theme 3: Striking a balance between residents' psychosocial needs and the prevention of COVID-19

- Concern about psychosocial loss of the elderly
  - Depression and loneliness ( due to prolonged separation with family)
  - ? Cognitive deterioration due to psychosocial loss (dementia patient)
- Difficulties to meet residents' psychosocial needs with limited resources
  - Visit arrangement (limited number of sessions)
  - Disruption of regular services (i.e. volunteer visit)
  - Increased workload and shortage of manpower

‘Some elderly’s family... because of the pandemic, they don’t come to visit as often as before. [The elderly] would miss or worry about their family. [The elderly would wonder] why don’t they come and visit me?’

「...有啲老人家其實屋企人，加上而家疫情啦，咁探訪時間會少左，會有啲掛住呀，或者擔心屋企人呀，點解咁耐都唔來探我呀？」

(Case 27, RN)

## Results:

### Theme 4: *Building up a stronger relationships with elders*

- Residential care workers see companionship and relationships with the elderly as valuable and meaningful
  - Due to restriction of visitors → Companionship of residential care workers become a significant psychological support towards elders
  - Perceiving psychosocial care as an important component of residential care
- Having a stronger relationships with elders
  - Residential care workers report that their bonding and relationships with the elderly strengthen in the pandemic

‘Because they are stuck here forever, they are not in a good mood. Sometimes I said to them, ‘well, there is nothing to worry about! Isn’t it good that you are seeing me everyday?’ I talk about these issues with them sometimes.’

「因為佢日日困住喺呢度呢，個心情都唔系咁好呀嘛，所以我哋有時同佢哋講下講下，哎呀，使乜驚嚇，你睇你而家日日對住我唔好咩，我同佢哋講呢啲咯。」


(Case 5, PCW)

‘Because of the impacts of the pandemic, they see us more often than their family. Therefore, besides delivering nursing care, we also spend times to communicate with them... We approach them actively and try to engage with them even though they are not willing to talk... These are also part of my work now.’

「其實疫情嗰個因素影響呢，其實佢地見我地仲多過見屋企人嘅，所以其實我地除左做護理工作嘅同時呢，我地都要攤返啲時間同佢地溝通啦... 我地就會主動去搵佢地啦，公公婆婆唔願意講野嘅時候呢，我地都會諗啲辦法點樣幫佢地解悶呀咁樣咯...呢啲都係我地嘅工作內容之一來嘅。」

(Case 21, EN)

# Conclusion

- Residential care workers experienced a high level of psychological stresses at the onset of the pandemic regarding the risk of infection and the responsibility to care for a vulnerable population.
  - They are frustrated with ineffective testing and infection control measures, lack of resources and administrative support, and the psychological and physical loss caused to the elder residents by lock-down measures.
-  Residential care workers see themselves not only as caregivers but also family members who provide companionship and emotional support.



# Implication

- Physical and psychological support to frontline health care workers.
  - Long-term care policy planning :
    - Clear guideline for the arrangement of staffs towards novel infectious agents
  - Administrative and institutional support
  
- Considering the psychosocial needs of elders in RCHes.
  - Increase communication with relatives, E.g with the help of technology?

→ Silver lining under the pandemic (E.g. Newly joined health care sector during the pandemic because of work stability; new mode of caregiving)

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