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## Despite protests, blockades and abuse, nurses continue to provide care

By Liz Bruckner

While there's no denying the fact that the last two years have taken an incredible toll on health-care workers of all stripes, according to Dr. Sylvain Brousseau, RN, PhD, and president of the Canadian Nurses Association, the pandemic has also shone a much-needed light on the vital impact nurses have on the health system. And in the process, it's also increased the public's understanding of what a nurse is and does.

Of course, these years have also been fraught with challenges for these professionals, many of whom, Dr. Brousseau says, are rooted in decades-long workplace issues that have been greatly exacerbated by the pandemic.

"Simply put, nurses and other health care workers are burned out, exhausted and demoralized," he says. "The main factors driving this reality and the increase in health-care worker shortages have long been a concern, but after juggling unbearable workloads and unsafe working conditions for two hard years – to the point that many have faced 16-hour-plus shifts, have not been able to take a day off, have had their vacations suspended, and/or they're facing chronic understaffing issues – it's understandable that this is the point many in the profession have reached."

Add to this the fact that pandemic fatigue has incentivized some people to take out their frustrations over government mandates and restrictions on health-care workers via protests and blockades, and it's little wonder that nurses are discouraged, drained and overwhelmed.

"What many of the people organizing and participating in these demonstrations haven't considered is, with or without COVID-19, car accidents, heart attacks and a myriad of other health-related needs still happen and require immediate medical care," says Morgan Hoffarth, RN, and president of the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario. "The hospital entrance protests we saw, combined with the increases in aggressive behaviour toward nurses and health-care workers in general, are disappointing, unwarranted, and they interfere with the care patients desperately need."

So, what can the general public do to help? Hoffarth says continuing to receive vaccinations, as needed, and wearing a mask in indoor public settings to help prevent the

spread of COVID-19 are a great place to start.

"Not only will you protect yourself and those around you, you'll also be protecting nurses and all medical professionals who live in the general public," she says. "Nurses who contract COVID can't go to work, which can hugely impact their workplace and, in circumstances where multiple nurses are sick simultaneously, can even result in units being closed due to staffing shortages."

Staying home and isolating when you're sick is another great way to show your appreciation and respect for all nurses have done and continue to do, as is being considerate of the human being behind the uniform.

"When patients reach a point where they need to seek out health care, we understand that it can be a vulnerable and stressful time, but it's important to know that releasing your frustrations on nurses who are trying to help you is counterproductive," she says. "I encourage people to remember that it's probably not the nurse's fault you may have to wait to be seen, and that, ultimately, treating people with respect is always the right approach."

Dr. Brousseau agrees.

"We need to care for nurses so that nurses can care for us, and it's vital that Canadians as a whole understand this," he says. "Being respectful and kind to every health-care professional should be a given, as we need to do all we can to fight COVID-19 and its variants, and to ensure respectful working environments for health-care workers who are already past their breaking point."

He adds that while physical and verbal abuse in the workplace for many health-care workers is not a new or pandemic-specific occurrence – 61 per cent of nurses reported a serious problem with violence over a 12-month period in 2017 – he says it's imperative that nurses once again feel safe at work.

"When our health workforce is overworked, overburdened and not supported, there is a direct impact on the functioning and performance of the health system... The best short-term strategy to deal with our health workforce crisis is to keep the professionals we have, and to do that, we must have work environments where nurses feel safe and want to be there. Respectful interaction with the public is an important part of that strategy," Dr. Brousseau says.