Contact tracing during the COVID-19 outbreak: exploring the psychological impact on contact tracers

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Background:
In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Irish health system redeployed public sector staff to contact tracing and recruited dedicated contact tracing staff. While contact tracers are provided with rapid intensive training they work in a dynamic setting, and may experience difficulties in managing the public’s distress. Real-time data is essential to inform strategy, and respond to needs. This study aimed to understand the psychological impact on contact tracers and inform the development of appropriate supports.

Methods:
A mixed methods design was used to collect data over three time points during 2021 using an online survey and semi-structured interviews. Measures included the Oldenburg Burnout Scale, the Perceived Stress Scale-14, the General Health Questionnaire 12, and the Impact of Events Scale-6. Survey data was analysed with ANOVAs and multiple regressions. Contact tracing systems issues, and concerns among the public were identified. Interviews, analysed using thematic analysis, provided an in-depth understanding of contact tracers’ experiences. At time point 1, 139 contact tracers completed the survey, and 22 were interviewed.

Results:
Burnout related exhaustion was experienced by 57% of contact tracers, 52% experienced mental distress, and 26% reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Professional background was associated with PTSD [F = 6.43, p = .013], and perceived stress scores [F = 5.23, p = .024]. Age was associated with perceived stress [F = 7.38, p = .001]. These findings are preliminary. The quantitative and qualitative findings at each time point will be presented and compared with international benchmarks.

Conclusions:
The processes of contact tracing and the psychological impact on contact tracers during the COVID-19 pandemic have been
under researched. Findings aim to support the national contact management programme to identify problems, implement solutions for systems issues; and support contact tracer’s well-being.

**Key messages:**
- Rapid feedback of our findings to the contact management programme will support the programme by identifying system and process issues, and informing psychological support for contact tracing staff.
- Little research attention has been paid to the potential emotional burden on contact tracers. This study will offer much needed insight into the psychological health of contact tracers in a pandemic.