Concise Communication

A survey of preparedness against coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in hospitals in Tokyo, Japan, with healthcare personnel with COVID-19 and in-facility transmission

Yasuaki Tagashira MD, PhD1-2, Akane Takamatsu MD1-2, Shinya Hasegawa MD1, Yuki Uenoyama CRIC1 and Hitoshi Honda MD, PhD1

1Division of Infectious Diseases, Tokyo Metropolitan Tama Medical Center, Tokyo, Japan and 2Department of Microbiology, Juntendo University Graduate School of Medicine, Tokyo, Japan

Abstract

A questionnaire was distributed to hospitals in Tokyo (N = 38) regarding their preparedness against and in-facility transmission of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). As of May 31, 2020, 284 HCP had contracted COVID-19, and in-facility COVID-19 transmission occurred at 13 hospitals, negatively impacting hospital functions and patient care.

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Healthcare personnel (HCP) are at much higher risk than the general population of contracting coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), despite advanced hospital infection control strategies. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States reported that ~500 frontline HCP in the United States had died from COVID-19 by the end of July 2020. In the present study, we used an Internet search to identify hospitals in Tokyo that issued press releases or held press conferences about their HCP who contracted COVID-19. Questionnaires were then distributed to these hospitals regarding their COVID-19 pandemic preparedness, routes of HCP infection, and resulting impacts on patient care and hospital functions.

Methods

Study design

The present study was based on responses to a questionnaire sent to hospitals in Tokyo, Japan, regarding HCP with COVID-19. The cumulative number of patients with laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 in Tokyo at the time of this study was 5,236. We searched the websites of healthcare facilities that issued press releases or held press conferences regarding their HCP with COVID-19 between January 1, 2020, and May 31, 2020. We also searched the Internet for news about hospitals with infected HCP using the same key words. Overall, we identified 53 hospitals. The survey was conducted from June 4 to 17, 2020. The questionnaire collected the following information: (1) probable COVID-19 transmission routes and outcomes, including clinical outcomes, in all the infected HCP and patients; (2) nosocomial transmission to inpatients and their clinical outcomes; (3) impact of COVID-19 transmission on hospital functions; (4) institutional preparedness against COVID-19; and (5) deleterious effects on hospital function related to the presence of infected HCP and nosocomial COVID-19 transmission. Nosocomial transmission was defined as in-facility COVID-19 onset, whereas community acquisition was defined as all other infections. The onset of infection was determined solely by the respondents.

Results

Baseline information on hospitals with HCP with COVID-19

Overall, 53 hospitals with HCP with COVID-19 were identified based on press releases, press conferences, or media reports. Among these, 38 (72%) participated in our survey. Appendix 1 (online) shows their baseline characteristics.

In total, 284 HCP in 38 hospitals contracted COVID-19. The median age of the infected HCP was 32 years (range, 20–81), and 211 (74%) were female. Nurses accounted for 141 cases, and 155 personnel (55%) were involved in caring for patients with COVID-19 before becoming infected. Although 22 of 38 (58%) of the first HCP to become infected at each participating hospital were thought to have acquired the disease via community-onset infection, a large proportion of supervenient infections among HCP was thought to be due to nosocomial transmission (Table 1 and Appendix 2 online). Although 267 of these HCP (94%) subsequently returned to work, 12 (4%) were suspended or retired after contracting COVID-19.
| Characteristics                                      | No. (%) |
|-----------------------------------------------------|---------|
| **HCP with COVID-19**                               |         |
| No. of HCP with COVID-19, median (range)            | 3 (1–51)|
| Duration of suspension from work in infected HCP or those with close contact to patients with COVID-19, median d (range) | 14 (5–14) |
| **Mode of initial transmission in HCP**             |         |
| Community acquisition                               | 22 (57.9) |
| In-facility (nosocomial) transmission               | 10 (26.3) |
| Unknown                                             | 6 (15.8) |
| **Preventive measures for HCP in close contact with COVID-19 patients** |         |
| None                                                | 1 (2.6) |
| Home quarantine only                                | 5 (13.2) |
| Home quarantine + PCR for all HCP in close contact with COVID-19 patients | 20 (52.6) |
| Home quarantine + PCR for symptomatic HCP in close contact with COVID-19 patients | 3 (7.9) |
| Continued work + PCR for all HCP in close contact with COVID-19 patients | 7 (18.4) |
| Continued work + PCR for symptomatic HCP in close contact with COVID-19 patients | 2 (5.3) |
| Cumulative number of PCR tests for HCP as of May 31, 2020 median (range) | 53 (2–697) |
| **In-facility (nosocomial) transmission**           |         |
| In-facility (nosocomial) transmission to hospitalized patients | 13 (34.2) |
| No. of hospitalized patients contracting COVID-19 via in-facility (nosocomial) transmission, average, (range) | 4 (0–37) |
| **Impact of in-facility (nosocomial) transmission on hospital function** |         |
| **Outpatient function**                             |         |
| None                                                | 15 (39.5) |
| Nonadmission of new outpatients                     | 16 (42.1) |
| Restricted follow-up visits                         | 7 (18.4) |
| Nonadmission of new patients in emergency department (n=34) | 15/34 (44.1) |
| **Inpatient function**                              |         |
| None                                                | 10 (26.3) |
| Nonadmission of new inpatients in all inpatient wards | 11 (28.9) |
| Nonadmission of new inpatients in wards with in-facility (nosocomial) transmission | 12 (31.6) |
| Closure of inpatient wards with in-facility (nosocomial) transmission | 10 (26.3) |
| Closure of all inpatient wards                      | 1 (2.6) |
| **Disclosure of HCP with COVID-19 or in-facility (nosocomial) transmission of COVID-19** |         |
| Website only                                        | 28 (73.7) |
| Press conference only                               | 1 (2.6) |
| Website + press conference                         | 2 (5.3) |
| Website + press release                             | 7 (18.4) |
| Media coverage of HCP with COVID-19 or in-facility (nosocomial) transmission | 23 (60.5) |
| Request for interviews regarding HCP with COVID-19 or in-facility (nosocomial) transmission by mass media | 8 (21.1) |
| Negative effects on HCP with COVID-19 or in-facility (nosocomial) transmission |         |
| Harassment or stigmatization                        | 18 (47.4) |
| **Media reporting on HCP with COVID-19 or in-facility (nosocomial) transmission at study center** |         |
| Critical                                            | 8 (21.1) |
| Neutral                                             | 18 (47.4) |
| No reporting                                        | 11 (28.9) |

(Continued)
Impacts of COVID-19 transmission on HCP, inpatients, and hospital functions

Table 1 shows the details of the institutional experiences of healthcare personnel and patients with COVID-19. Nosocomial severe acute respiratory coronavirus virus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) transmission to inpatients occurred at 13 of the 38 hospitals (34%). The total number of cases of nosocomial SARS-CoV-2 transmission to inpatients at the 13 hospitals reached 156, and 42 of these patients (27%) died during hospitalization. Of the remaining 114 patients, only 21 of 156 (14%) fully recovered, and 93 of 156 (60%) continued to be hospitalized at the time of data collection.

At most of the hospitals, HCP with suspected exposure were removed from the front line until their negativity for SARS-CoV-2 was confirmed, and HCP with suspected exposure in outpatient services (23 of 38, 61%) and inpatient services (28 of 38, 74%) were restricted or temporarily suspended. In addition, 18 hospitals (47%) reported verbal abuse against both infected and noninfected HCP and their family members following reports of nosocomial SARS-CoV-2 transmission (Appendix 2 online). Moreover, a portion of the respondents felt that media reports negatively affected the functioning of their own hospital (8 of 38, 21%) or other hospitals (24 of 38, 63%).

Hospital preparedness for COVID-19 and association with in-facility COVID-19 transmission

Table 2 compares preparedness for COVID-19 by the end of February 2020 among hospitals with or without nosocomial COVID-19 transmission. Hospitals with nosocomial transmission may have had less intensive hospital-level infection control practices, such as providing separate passages for patients with suspected COVID-19, or they may not have had a preparedness planning committee or hospital-specific COVID-19 guidance in place by the end of February 2020.

Discussion

By May 31, 2020, several hospitals in Tokyo reported nosocomial transmission of COVID-19 and infected HCP. As elsewhere, COVID-19 infections were common among HCP, who are at high risk of contracting the disease during patient treatment. Asymptomatic or minimally symptomatic cases among HCP can also result in transmission. Nosocomial transmission can also be exacerbated by shortages of personal protective equipment and alcohol-based sanitizers. Unfortunately, a high mortality rate among inpatients with COVID-19 due to nosocomial transmission was observed, in line with other reports. The findings of the present study underscored the importance of preventing the nosocomial transmission of COVID-19.
Table 2. Hospital Preparedness Against Nosocomial Transmission of COVID-19*

| Preparedness Achieved by the End of February 2020 | Hospitals With Nosocomial Transmission (n=13), No. (%) | Hospitals Without Nosocomial Transmission (n=25), No. (%) | P Value |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|---------|
| Organization of preparedness planning committee | 38 6 (46.2)                                             | 19 (64.0)                                             | .08     |
| Hospital-specific COVID-19 preparedness guidance (eg, hospital guidelines, manuals, etc) available to all HCP | 38 6 (46.2)                                             | 22 (88.0)                                             | .02     |
| Creation of separate passages for patients with suspected COVID-19 to minimize cross contamination in emergency department | 34 2/11 (18.2)                                        | 17/23 (73.9)                                         | .004    |
| Creation of separate passages for patients with suspected COVID-19 to minimize cross contamination in outpatient clinic | 38 5 (26.3)                                             | 17 (73.9)                                             | .01     |
| Creation of separate passages for patients with suspected COVID-19 for admission to inpatient wards | 38 3(23.1)                                              | 12(48.0)                                              | .10     |
| Restriction of visits to hospitalized patients | 38 9 (69.2)                                             | 16 (64.0)                                             | 1.00    |
| Universal masking for all hospital visitors | 38 8 (61.5)                                            | 13 (52.0)                                             | 1.00    |
| Universal masking for all HCP | 38 11 (84.6)                                           | 15 (60.0)                                             | .50     |
| Designation of special wards for patients with COVID-19 | 38 4 (30.8)                                            | 10 (40.0)                                             | .73     |
| Hospital-wide symptom reporting system for HCP | 38 8 (61.5)                                            | 12 (48.0)                                             | 1.00    |

Note. SARS-CoV-2, severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2; COVID-19, coronavirus disease 2019; HCP, healthcare personnel.

* Facilities with nosocomial transmission were reported by the respondents.

online). Verbal abuse of infected HCP has been reported globally. Changes in the public mindset and improved understanding of COVID-19 transmissibility are needed to eliminate this sort of behavior.

In general, inadequate hospital preparedness during the early phase of the pandemic was likely associated with nosocomial COVID-19 transmission. The community spread of COVID-19 began in February 2020, and hospital preparedness by the end of February 2020 serves as an important index of the preparedness mindset prior to the surge in infections. The preparedness planning and organization of committees at the hospitals in this study demonstrated the generally proactive efforts of the hospital leadership. The availability of hospital-wide guidelines to deal with COVID-19 and prompt implementation of infection control practices reflected the general competence of the infection control departments. Moreover, other hospital-wide measures, such as providing special passages for patients with suspected COVID-19 to minimize potential facility-wide contamination, were more common among hospitals without nosocomial transmission.

This study has several limitations. The exact mode of transmission to either HCP or inpatients was unable to be determined due to the lack of a clear definition of nosocomial transmission and community-onset COVID-19 infection. Because the determinations of the transmission mode and infection onset were made by individual infection control personnel and were self-reported by the facility, the data were not validated. Moreover, because the questionnaire depended completely on the respondents’ impression and reports, a response bias may have been introduced. Finally, our study focused solely on hospitals in Tokyo; thus, the findings may not reflect the situation elsewhere.

In conclusion, COVID-19 transmission among HCP and nosocomial transmission to inpatients was common and negatively affected hospital functioning and patient care. Furthermore, to preserve the safety and dignity of HCP with COVID-19, changes in the public’s mindset and better understanding of the transmissibility of COVID-19 are needed.

Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit https://doi.org/10.1017/ice.2020.1304

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