

Commentary

Heroes should not die by suicide: The tragic life of Dr. Lorna Breen

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Earlier this week, I came across a troubling headline in a popular Canadian news outlet titled 'She was a hero': ER doctor who treated COVID-19 patients in NYC has died by suicide". We glorify our frontline healthcare workers, praise them with hero-like effigies, and worship them when they are perished. In fact, they are human like any of us and possibly more vulnerable to diseases, disorders and death by virtue of their line of work. The recent news about the tragic death of Dr. Lorna Breen, an ER doctor in Manhattan, New York should be treated as a wake-up call. Healthcare workers including doctors, nurses and paramedics are at a greater risk of serious mental health issues and suicide.

What is alarming to me about the news headlines such as the above is the way such cases are represented in media. These headlines are troubling, irresponsible and dangerous. My problem is twofold:

1) We do not pay enough attention to frontline healthcare workers' mental health which we should. This is due to chronic lack of research studies that need to include healthcare workers other than doctors and nurses (Dutheil et al, 2019).

2) Media outlets often glorify and sensationalize suicide, as in this case by giving it hero-like quality, and may inadvertently encourage copycat behavior by vulnerable individuals (Berry, 2013).

Given the current global crisis, governments and health sector agencies and groups need to address the issue of mental health among frontline healthcare workers (Khanlou, 2020; Khanlou & Orziatti, 2020). Further, they need to dedicate resources to positive partnership with the media as part of their strategy, targeting to improve coverage of mental health.

References

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