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Managing the long-term effects of COVID-19: implications for community nurses

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COVID-19 has disrupted almost every aspect of life since 2020. The initial and continuing challenges around the virus and its manifestations has required practitioners and researchers to respond at pace using approaches akin to 'natural experiments', given the many factors out of their control.

Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic remains a worldwide human crisis, with a profound effect on health and wellbeing alongside its socio-economic impact. The emergence of 'post-COVID-19 syndrome' or 'long COVID', where the fluctuating signs, symptoms and symptom clusters persist for 12 weeks or more, and other diagnoses are excluded, is concerning (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), 2022). As of March 2023, the Office for National Statistics (2023) have estimated that 1.9 million people or 2.9% of the UK population are experiencing self-reported long COVID. Long COVID is a new disease and a complex multi-system condition with over 200 reported symptoms. Fatigue is the most common one followed by difficulty concentrating/brain fog, muscle ache and pain and shortness of breath (NICE, 2022; Torrance et al 2023).

Day to day support for many of the challenges faced by vulnerable people affected by long COVID is provided by community nurses. Community nurses have an in-depth understanding of their communities and are well placed to advocate on behalf of vulnerable people and their family/lay carers. Long COVID can be debilitating, with some people requiring intense physical and emotional support over a long period of time. However, clinical pathways for long COVID are in early stages of development and implementation. Some vulnerable people will need ongoing monitoring in secondary care and yet, may not be visible to mainstream services and considered for clinical rehabilitation.

Nurses in the community have an important role to play in coordinating health and social care for those affected by long COVID across primary and secondary care. They can help to make the voices of their vulnerable communities heard. It is essential they contribute to the development of service delivery models which can respond to the challenges long COVID presents due to its unpredictable and relapsing nature.

Community nurses were at the forefront of supporting people at home during the early stages of the pandemic. In doing so, they, alongside other front-line workers, put themselves at higher risk of contracting COVID-19 and therefore, long COVID. Health workers affected by long COVID need long-term support and flexible employment opportunities to help retain skills and expertise in the workforce (Torrance et al, 2023). The dual impact of supporting those with long COVID in communities, alongside the impact of the pandemic on the workforce is challenging. This is particularly so when pent up demand and fiscal constraints on the NHS and social care exist. The community nursing voice needs to be heard at this critical time as people, families and the health and social care workforce deal with the ongoing impact of an unprecedented pandemic and its legacy.

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