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Waiting to inhale: factors associated with healthcare workers' fears of occupationally acquired tuberculosis (TB)

CITATION

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ABSTRACT

Background: Fear of TB infection is rooted in historical and social memories of the disease, marked by stigma, segregation and exclusion. Healthcare workers (HCWs) face these same fears today, and even seek to hide their TB status when infected. This study sought to investigate factors associated with HCWs fears of acquiring TB while at work, including selected biographic characteristics, TB knowledge, infection control and perceptions that their colleagues stigmatise co-workers with TB/ presumed to have TB.

Methods: In the Free State Province, South Africa, a representative sample of 882 HCWs from eight hospitals completed self-administered questionnaires on issues related to fear of occupationally acquired TB, infection control, TB knowledge and workplace TB stigma. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics as well as binomial logistic regression.

Results: Most of the HCWs (67.2%) were concerned about contracting TB at work. Support staff were less likely to worry about acquiring TB than clinical staff (OR = 0.657, P = 0.041). Respondents who indicated that there were inadequate numbers of disposable respirators at work, were 1.6 times more likely to be afraid of contracting TB at work (P = 0.040). With every unit increase on the TB stigma scale, respondents were 1.1 times more likely to fear acquiring TB at work (P = 0.000).

Conclusion: Being a professional clinical HCW, not having adequate disposable respirators available and seeing/perceiving co-workers stigmatise colleagues with (presumptive) TB were all significantly associated with the fear of occupationally-acquired TB. It is recommended that campaigns to destigmatise TB, as well as appropriate TB infection control education and measures, are necessary to alleviate HCWs fears of acquiring the disease in the workplace. Ultimately this should create a health-enabling working environment, where HCWs are not afraid to function and are free to seek treatment and support when necessary.