

Nurses Share Coronavirus Stories Anonymously in an Online Document

A health care worker in New Jersey created a digital venue for people in the field to chronicle poor working conditions that may put patients at risk. “It is disgusting,” one nurse wrote.



Sonja Schwartzbach started compiling the accounts after she determined that hospital conditions were “far worse” than most people realized. Credit...Krissy Breece



By Edmund Lee

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More than 1,200 health care workers have used a private online document to share their stories of fighting the coronavirus pandemic on the front lines.

In their accounts, they say the [outbreak](#) has turned American hospitals into “war zones.” They talk about being scared to go to work and anxious that they will become infected. They describe managers who seem to not care about their plight.

“But we show up and have to keep showing up,” one nurse wrote, “and we have to test ourselves.”

The document was created on March 19 by Sonja Schwartzbach, a nurse in New Jersey who is studying as a doctoral student. She said she started compiling the accounts after she determined that hospital conditions were “far worse” than most people realized and that her fellow health care workers needed a place to share what they were seeing.

“There was such desperation,” she said in an interview. “And it wasn’t being adequately addressed in the news media.”

Ms. Schwartzbach, 34, asked contributors to provide their accounts anonymously, so that they could be candid without fear of losing their jobs. “There’s also a history within nursing of retaliation,” she said.

At the top of the document, Ms. Schwartzbach made an appeal to anyone in the field who had something to contribute: “This isn’t a polite request: This is an urgent demand. Tell me your story. Share your situations. I understand that it can feel challenging to be candid as a health care provider, but this is the difference between life and death.”

Ms. Schwartzbach said she created a [Google document](#) titled “Covid-19: Mission for Masks” after fielding hundreds of messages from nurses and physicians on [Instagram](#), where she has more than 47,000 followers.

Contributors have described challenges at hospitals across the nation. The lack of proper equipment, particularly the [N95 masks](#) needed by doctors and nurses, is the biggest problem. Over 90 percent of the respondents said they lacked the right gear.

Many in the survey said they have been instructed to clean their masks and reuse them for several days. The cleaning procedures that they have been asked to follow do not appear to be in keeping with the [latest decontamination methods](#) recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Other contributors have reported that they were told to cover their mouths with bandannas or coffee filters.

“We were told to use a bandanna because so many of our supplies were stolen from patients early on,” a Colorado nurse wrote.

Workers across many industries have used crowdsourced online documents to anonymously report workplace issues, from a list of [men in the media industry](#) accused of harassing or abusing women to pay [disparities](#) in advertising.

Ms. Schwartzbach agreed to share some of the private document with The New York Times because, she said, “I couldn’t stay quiet about it any longer.”

One contributor, a nurse in California, wrote: “We are being called to jeopardize our own health and safety to treat our community. It is disgusting. I wish more attention would be given to us on the front lines and the situation we face. We live in the richest country in the world and yet we don’t have the tools to perform our job safely. This virus is terrifying.”

Of the 1,253 respondents thus far, about 55 percent said they were caring for patients infected by Covid-19. About 26 percent said “they weren’t sure” if their patients were suffering from the virus, noting the [general lack of available testing kits](#).

Contributors have also reported that gowns and gloves were being reused, which may cause serious problems for intensive care patients.

“We actually got an email saying not to remove gloves when in a room if they get soiled, but to use sanitizer on the gloves!” wrote a Pennsylvania nurse working in a pediatric intensive care unit. “You also have to keep the same surgical mask on the entire shift. You only get an N95 if certain procedures are being done that would produce aerosols. This is absolutely unacceptable and puts all the staff, other patients and my family at high risk.”

As the country faces the pandemic, [a focus on the economic repercussions](#) has so far overshadowed the reality of fighting a new virus with a diminishing stockpile of crucial supplies.

At a Tuesday town hall discussion on Fox News, President Trump, who has often cited the stock market as a measure of the success of his presidency, said businesses across the country could reopen as soon as April 12. “I think it’s possible, why not?” he [said](#).

In New York, the new virus epicenter, cases are doubling every three days. Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo said the state will need up to 140,000 hospital beds in addition to the 53,000 now available. “Those are troubling and astronomical numbers,” he [said](#) at a Tuesday news conference at the Javits Center in Manhattan, an event space that the Army Corps of Engineers is converting into a 1,000-bed hospital.

A nurse in New York has seen the problem up close. “Our hospital is taking on way more patients than we can handle,” she said in Ms. Schwartzbach’s online survey.

According to another nurse who contributed to the document, a doctor who had been traveling abroad and was later found to be infected with the coronavirus was allowed to interact with health care workers at a Pennsylvania hospital. “Half the staff is currently quarantined because of this doctor,” the nurse reported.

A Texas nurse with 17 years of experience in emergency rooms wrote: “Never seen anything like this. Protocols change minute to minute if there are any at all. I can no longer trust the CDC. For the first time in my career I am scared to go to work.”

Describing the fight to hold on to the last bits of remaining protective gear, a health care worker in Georgia put it succinctly: “It’s every man for himself at this point.”

Edmund Lee covers the media industry as it grapples with changes from Silicon Valley. Before joining The Times he was the managing editor at Vox Media’s Recode. [@edmundlee](#)

LINK TO STORY: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/25/business/media/coronavirus-nurses-stories-anonymous.html>