**Title:**

Challenges to providing relational care in long-term care homes during COVID-19: Emerging results from an online critical incident method study

**Introduction/background:**

Relational care practices are crucial in maintaining older persons' wellbeing and self-awareness and identity. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and related policies, such as, physical distancing and use of full PPE, have severely hindered healthcare workers’ ability to provide relational care. Our study purpose was to understand the challenges faced by healthcare workers in engaging in relational care of older people in long-term care settings during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Methods:**

This qualitative study employed a critical incident method. The sample included 51 healthcare workers who worked in long-term care homes during waves 1 and 2, many of whom are registered practical nurses, registered nurses, and advanced practice nurses. Participants completed an online questionnaire. Typed responses were de-identified and analyzed thematically.

**Results and analysis:**

Participants identified numerous personal and institutional challenges and barriers to providing relational care, which resulted in moral distress, compassion fatigue, and burnout. On the personal level, challenges to providing relational care included fear and anxiety regarding viral transmission, the absence of family members who are essential care partners, mitigating the anger and mistrust of residents and their families, and addressing residents’ deteriorating cognitive ability as a result of their social isolation. Institutional barriers to providing relational care included staffing shortages, inadequate supplies, lack of access to communication technology, limited mental health support, and management’s inconsistent oversight of healthcare workers’ concerns. However, participants also provided insight into their flexibility and creativity in engaging in relational care practices despite the challenges and barriers they faced.

**Conclusions and implications for** **policy, practice or additional research:**

Maintaining relational care during COVID-19 requires additional support and resources, and access to technology and equipment for healthcare workers. Additionally, organizational leaders must maintain close communication and collaborate with healthcare workers to set the conditions to further support their ability to engage in relational care of residents during (post)pandemic contexts.