

# Healthcare Heroes: Lebanese Nurses

## Experiences with COVID-19



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Nurses as of 2019 is 16356<sup>3</sup>. 9800 work in Hospitals and around 545 work in Primary Health care centers and the remaining number of nurses is distributed among schools, universities and companies etc.

Lebanese nurses like all nurses around the world were at the front line taking care of individuals with COVID 19 or potential carriers. Each of the nurses working with these patients were potentially putting their own health at risk, and we know that many nurses contracted the virus despite their best efforts to keep themselves safe. Lebanese Nurses worked incredibly hard, with both courage and compassion, in extremely difficult and stressful circumstances.

To add to the COVID-19 pandemic, Lebanon starting October 17, 2019 was living in a state of revolution and financial crash which has put nurses under additional stress since most hospitals were not providing nurses with enough PPEs in terms of number and quality. In addition, many hospitals started to layoff nurses and this has put the remaining nurses under more pressure with the increase in nurse patient ratio and consequently threat to patient safety. Also nurses were living sharp wage reductions against already under value remuneration and many were asked to take unpaid vacation days. Moreover, some hospitals were asking nurses who were exposed or got the virus to isolate themselves on their own expenses. So in summary the working conditions for Lebanese nurses were not favorable at all in terms of financial, work conditions and safety.

Despite all these unfavorable conditions the nursing workforce in Lebanon did not give up; on the contrary they proved another time to be the first line of defense about the health care system and the health of the people of Lebanon.

### Order of Nurses' Response

The Order of Nurses (ONL) since December 2019 started watching with concern the condition in China. In a proactive initiative and before the occurrence of any COVID-19

case in the country the ONL started in support of WHO to train nurses working in hospitals mainly emergency units, Primary Health Care centers and Schools about Covid-19, mode of transmission and prevention measures.

Until now around 80 Lebanese nurses got infected with COVID-19 and the numbers are on the ascending curve. Almost all infected nurses had mild symptoms many of them isolated themselves at home and few stayed at their own hospital. Interesting to note that none of the nurses who was working on Covid-19 units got infected. All infected nurses got it either from the community or while working on open units. Needless to mention the social bullying that nurses endured from friends, citizens, and even family members. In order to counteract this social behavior, the Order of Nurses immediately started a series of actions such as social awareness about COVID-19, its mode of transmission and the important role that nurses are playing to protect people's health. The Order started to oppose the social stigma by a media campaign through different slogans such as: "Nurses are the army of the health care system"; "Nurses are the first line of defense for health". Those watchwords were used because we know the level of appreciation and esteem that Lebanese people hold for the Lebanese Army. Through this approach the role of nurses was highlighted, highly valued within the society and the bullying against nurses started to fade to a point where nurses were called "heroes of the health care system". This approach raised the nurses' moral and self-esteem but unfortunately did not help much in the fight for rights which the Order is still pursuing until now. The Order of Nurses in collaboration and with the support of LATTER-DAY SAINT CHARITIES (LDS) rented a hotel and it was put at the disposition of nurses to use in case they needed accommodation for isolation or quarantine and they did not have a place at home to do so. So far one nurse is currently using this facility and many started to contact the ONL for this purpose.

The Order was represented on the national emergency COVID-19 health committee and played a pivotal role in major decision making at the national level. The Order as well played a leadership role on assessment, evaluation and approval of all isolation and quarantine sites for PCR + or exposed individuals with minimal to low symptoms and not needing hospitalization and played a central role in formulating the national guidelines for such centers. Moreover, the Order was designated by WHO as the main

entity for recruiting and training nurses that were hired in all centers.

The ONL assigned nurses at the Airport and borders as well. It is worth noting that board members at the Order of Nurses took in charge at the beginning of the pandemic for a period of one month and a half the hotline of the MOPH from 7 pm till 8 am on daily basis.

Many hospitals were imposing on nurses who were exposed to COVID-19 to do a quarantine or isolation on their own expenses. The Order in collaboration with the Minister of Labor was able to issue a decree contradicting this approach and it gave the right to nurses to go on a paid quarantine or isolation time.

The Order of Nurses planned and implemented an influential campaign to defend nurses' right. Position papers were presented to the President of the republic and Prime Minister, Minister of Health and Minister of Labor. Visits were done to the involved decision makers including deputies and the health committee at the Parliament. Media campaigns were launched. Several meetings were held with nurses from different hospitals to support and guide them in their struggles for rights.

### Conclusion

The Order of Nurses is proud of the courage and commitment of Lebanese nurses who are delivering care to patients during this pandemic and under very difficult circumstances. Working under these conditions takes an immense physical and emotional toll on nurses. It is imperative that basic needs of nurses in terms of safe working environment, rights and proper recognition be guaranteed; otherwise, the whole health care system would be in great danger. The Order of Nurses will continue to do the work to ensure that every step is taken to keep nurses safe and to safeguard their rights.

### References

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2. MOPH Lebanon data <https://www.moph.gov.lb/en/Pages/13/29382/monitoring-of-covid-19-> (accessed July 15, 2020)
3. Order of Nurses Lebanon, Statistics, 2019, <http://www.orderofnurses.org.lb/PDF/Statistique%202019%20AR.pdf#zoom=120>.

### Preamble

The Order of Nurses (ONS) was founded in 2002 under law 479/2002. The ONS is the only official body representing the nursing work force in Lebanon. Since its inception, the Order of Nurses in line with its mission and vision is working on improving the level and image of nursing in Lebanon and in preserving nurses' rights.

### Introduction

In December 2019, a newly identified coronavirus, known as COVID-19, emerged in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China causing illness in humans. Multiple clusters of COVID-19 have since been reported across China and across the Globe. The World Health Organization<sup>1</sup> (WHO) on March 11 declared COVID-19 a pandemic, pointing to the over 118,000 cases of the coronavirus illness in over 110 countries and territories around the world and the sustained risk of further global spread. The first case that appeared in Lebanon<sup>2</sup> was Feb 21, 2020 and since then the number of cases was on the increase curve until March 15 when the government of Lebanon declared a state of national health emergency all over the country.

### Our pride, our heroes

In Lebanon the Number of registered nurses at the Order of