TMTD Türk Multidisipliner Tıp Dergisi
TURKISH JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY MEDICINE

OpusVia Publisher

*Article*

# Problems Experienced by Nurses in Northern Cyprus During COVID-19 and Solution Suggestions

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Received: 01.10.2026 ◆ Accepted: 25.10.2026 ◆ Published: 15.10.2026

Cite this article as: Avcı MZ. Problems experienced by nurses in Northern Cyprus during COVID-19 and solution suggestions. Turk J Multidiscip Med. 2026;1(1):10-16.

## Abstract

Aim: The purpose of this study is to highlight the problems nurses faced during the COVID -19 pandemic and the solutions they used to overcome them. Unlike similar studies, this study deals with the health care system of Northern Cyprus, which is an island country. In addition to countries with large economies, it also aims to show how the pandemic is experienced in regions with limited economic levels.

Background: COVID -19 has been an important experience in the professional lives of all health care professionals, especially physicians and nurses, since 2019. Health systems were affected in countries with different economic infrastructure during the pandemic. The situation of hospitals and the health system during the COVID -19 pandemic in Northern Cyprus, an island country, was discussed based on the experiences of nurses.

Methods: In this research, data were collected using a case study, one of the qualitative research methods, and a semi-structured interview. The interviews were conducted with 30 nurses from different regions of Northern Cyprus who worked in public hospitals during the pandemic COVID -19. The content analysis method used in qualitative research was applied to the data obtained.

Results: From the results of the interviews, 2 themes and 4 subthemes emerged. While the nurses' major problems were "insufficient hospital capacity" and "shortage of nurses," it was noted that they received "psychological and professional support" from the nurses' association and unions in proposing solutions. In addition, in line with the nurses' opinions, the uncontrolled entry of tourists and the frequent travel of locals to England were cited as reasons for the increase in COVID -19 cases in Northern Cyprus.

Conclusion: The results show that nurses are trying to spend the pandemic in difficult conditions in countries where the economy and the health system are not sufficiently developed. The nurses are motivated by professional solidarity and try to transmit their demands in this direction to the competent authorities. This study has shown the need to recruit more health workers and to build new hospitals through the nursing profession.

Keywords: hospital capacity limitations, psychological and social challenges, nursing, qualitative methods

## Introduction

Faced with a global epidemic in the 21st century, people have begun to struggle not only with the disease, but also with situations that affect society in various dimensions. With the COVID -19 pandemic, our daily habits have changed, as have different professional groups, and the workload of health workers has increased. The disease, called COVID -19 by the World Health Organization (WHO), is an acute respiratory illness with clinical symptoms including weakness, fever, shortness of breath, and cough [1]. Since 2019, there have been more than 420 million cases and nearly 6 million deaths worldwide. In Northern Cyprus, an island nation, there have been more than 64 thousand cases and about 180 deaths as of the writing of this article [2]. In Malta, another island nation with a similar population to Northern Cyprus, the number of cases is over 70 thousand, while the number of deaths is close to 600 [3]. In this regard, a comparison can be made about the health system and facilities of the two island countries, whose population and case numbers are similar.

In island countries such as Northern Cyprus, where the population is no more than 1 million, the health systems and hospital facilities are not sufficiently developed because tourism activities are generally the main source of economic income [4]. At the same time, it is very difficult to talk about short- and long-term action plans for a global pandemic in these regions. As a result of the pandemic, the economies, health care systems, education systems, purchasing systems, and working conditions in the countries have changed radically. Although the pandemic affects all segments of the population, especially health care workers, even though they have implemented all protective measures within the capabilities of the health care system, they are more likely to become infected because they are overexposed to the disease. Apart from the risk of getting infected, healthcare workers also face various psychological problems due to the intense working conditions and inadequate personal rights [5,6].

The main objective of this study is to investigate in depth the situation of health care workers in Northern Cyprus, an island country, during the pandemic COVID -19 and to highlight their problems and attempts to solve them. In this context, the research aims to guide the process of improving the system by highlighting the problems caused by underdeveloped health services during the pandemic period. In addition to countries with large economies, it is also intended to show how the pandemic is experienced in regions with limited economic levels.

## Materials and Methods

### Research Method

In order to reveal the problems of the nurses who worked in Northern Cyprus during the pandemic COVID -19 and their ways of coping, a single case design [7], one of the qualitative research methods, was used. Content analysis [8] was used in analyzing the data.

### Study Group of the Research

A total of 30 nurses working in COVID -19 service in hospitals in different regions of Northern Cyprus participated in this study in January 2022. The participating nurses participated on a voluntary basis. Volunteer statements were obtained from the participants and the University Ethics Committee approved the research. In this regard, the volunteers were selected according to the purposive sampling method in terms of their ability to work in COVID -19 service and to have a homogeneous distribution from different regions of Northern Cyprus, such as Girne, Nicosia, Famagusta, Lefke. Nurses were invited for appointments and interviewed according to their availability. The meetings were scheduled face to face and taking into account the precautions COVID -19. Nurses were assured that their identity information would be kept confidential as part of research ethics. In order not to use the names of the participants, each participant was given a number (K1,K2,K3,K4...). The demographic characteristics of the nurses who participated in the study are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of the participants (n=30)

| Demographic Profile | | n(%) |
|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | Female | 25 (83.4) |
| | Male | 5 (16.6) |
| **Age** | 22-30 | 12 (40) |
| | 31-35 | 10(33.3) |
| | 36-40 | 8 (26.6) |
| **Work Experience (Year)** | 1-5 | 18 (60) |
| | 6-10 | 10 (33.3) |
| | 11 ve üzeri | 2 (6.6) |
| **Region** | Kyrenia | 8 (26.6) |
| | Nicosia | 8 (26.6) |
| | Famagusta | 8 (26.6) |
| | Lefke | 6 (20) |

### Data Collection and Analysis Process

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview form created in accordance with the information obtained from the literature review. Interview questions were compiled as a result of two pilot studies lasting 65 minutes and were finalized after review by two qualitative research experts. Participants were asked 7 questions. 3 of the 7 questions in the interview form were set as general questions and the other 4 were set as probing questions. Through the use of the reflective interview technique, participants were provided with open and unbiased information as part of the data collection process. The average duration of each interview ranged from 30-40 minutes. A total of 960 minutes (16 hours) of data was collected. To increase the confirmability of the data, brief confirmatory interviews were conducted with participants after the recordings were transcribed into plain text.

Content analysis of the data obtained was conducted by the researcher. By having two different experts support the analysis at the same time as the researcher, codes of "agree" and "disagree" [9] were defined to increase the reliability of the study's analysis. Within the

framework of the formula developed by Miles and Huberman (1994), the reliability of

"Reliability=Agreement/(Agreement+Disagreement)"

was found to be 92%. The codes resulted in the formation of 2 themes and 4 subthemes. These themes were interpreted by supporting participants' anecdotes during the interviews. After the 21st participant, the study gradually began to reach data saturation. At all stages of the study, attention was paid to the principles of reliability, confirmability, transferability, credibility, and consistency.

## Results

### Problems Encountered

The problems faced by nurses during the COVID -19 process are discussed with two subthemes. The problems encountered are supported by the anecdotes of the participants.

### Personal and Social Problems

The social problems faced by health professionals have largely led them to turn to their inner world. In particular, the results showed that the fact that health professionals live their lives in isolation from society during the pandemic causes serious problems. Participants expressed that they were afraid to spend time with people in their social environment.

K1: In my social environment, for a long time there was a separating and isolating attitude, saying "you work in the hospital during the pandemic, you can be positive or in contact".

One of the most striking situations under this subtopic is the problems caused by patients in the hospital environment. Patients had conflicts with each other and with health care workers during long-term treatment in the hospital. In addition, the findings include that patients have difficulty in following the rules of the hospital, the acceptance of visitors continues despite the ban, and the provision of food and drink from outside cannot be prevented even if it is not necessary.

K4: We are saddened by the violent reactions of patients and their relatives.

K5: Conflicts between patients are often thrown back at us. Many patients have to stay in the same place because of space limitations.

The nurses have seen the greatest damage of the pandemic, which they have experienced due to their intense working conditions. He has gone through a psychologically difficult period of increasing his work hours, increasing his work pace, and isolating himself. During this time, the fear of getting sick and spreading the disease to their loved ones dominated. In addition, there is stress and burnout due to ignorance about the disease and not having enough experience. K10: For my family, loved ones, and myself, being in such close contact with patients with COVID -19 scared me.

K13: I kept thinking about when I was going to become covid.

K20: In the beginning, I had a lot of stress and anxiety. While the number of cases throughout Northern Cyprus was very low for a long time due to the closure of the country's entrances and exits, it suddenly increased with the border gates open. In this increase, people did not act consciously and did not pay enough attention to the disease rules. The main reason for the sharp increase in the number of cases has been shown to be the uncontrolled entry and exit of tourists into the country. K17: I think the reason for the increase in the number of cases is the inability of people to protect themselves and the people around them, and the fact that no one has yet reached full awareness. The nurses anecdotally expressed that they felt very sorry for the patients whose condition deteriorated and who died, and that a bond formed between them because they cared for the patients for whom they were responsible for an average of 14-21 days. K19: It was very hard for me to see their intubated patients suffer during this process.

### System Originated Problems

Nurses frequently mentioned the deficiencies and inadequacy of the system. In this process, the hotels were used as 'pandemic hotels' in line with the protocols made with the hotels that did not serve during the pandemic period due to the insufficient bed capacity of the hospital, and the patients who would stay in quarantine were provided to stay here. In places used as pandemic hotels, it was possible for each individual to stay in a hotel room, the need for three meals a day and PCR tests to be done by the filiation teams. In this period, the lack of protective equipment such as masks, overalls and visors was felt in hospitals.

K1: One of the biggest problems we experienced was due to the lack of material.

At the same time, the nurses stated that besides the lack of improvement in their financial opportunities, the additional overtime wages that they deserved were not paid. The personal rights and opportunities offered have led to the alienation of nurses and other health personnel from their profession. In addition, the nurses working with missing personnel tried to fulfill their duties under difficult conditions by undertaking the extra work alone.

K3: Our wages were not paid when we worked overtime.

K6: We had many problems due to the lack of nurses.

K9: The material, moral and psychological needs of health workers were not met.

Many stages have been passed from the definition of the pandemic, to the detection of the symptoms of the disease, to the trial of treatment methods and to the implementation of the vaccination process. During

these stages, as in every country, there were frequent rule changes in Northern Cyprus. The most changed rule change in Northern Cyprus, which is an island country, can be shown as the change in entry-exit to the country. Nurses stated that they had difficulty in following the rules arising from the system if they were updated.

K14: The rules of the system were constantly changing and we had a hard time following and following these rules.

According to the data of 2021, Northern Cyprus has a population of 382 thousand 836 people and the population has increased by 13.76% in the last two years [10]. In addition to this increase, there are thousands of international students and temporary residents for work reasons. Despite this rapidly increasing population, the lack of new hospital and service buildings and the lack of employment of health personnel is a matter of criticism.

K17: Despite the increasing population, the fact that the number of services and personnel remains the same and does not increase regularly can be seen as the biggest problem.

It is among the anecdotes obtained that mobbing cases were encountered in health institutions as the negative returns of the intense and stressful working environment during the pandemic period.

K18: We have been exposed to a lot of mobbing due to government policies.

With the increase in COVID-19 patients, a pandemic hospital has been established. However, in the early stages of the pandemic, patients with different complaints had to use the same environments. This has caused nurses to serve different patient groups at the same time.

K25: There was an increase in the number of pregnant and non-covid patients who applied to the hospital during the pandemic period, and these people used the same regions as the pandemic patients.

### Factors Contributing to Problem Resolution

While the support of the nurses from their colleagues came to the fore in solving the problems, there was also the situation of getting used to the process with the advancing time and the settled system.

### Colleague Support

The nurses stated that they value professional ethics and that they always support each other, both professionally and psychologically with their colleagues, so that they can overcome the problems more easily.

K2: I got support from my colleagues when I had difficulties. There were times when we supported each other both professionally and psychologically.

From the beginning of the pandemic, each country provided training on some protective methods and measures that were tailored to their own healthcare system. These trainings for health professionals were very important in managing the process.

K3: We received trainings at the beginning of the pandemic to learn the protection methods, they helped us.

Nurses reported receiving online and in-person psychological support to help them cope with problems.

K14: The nurses definitely needed professional psychological support.

With the conversion of universities to online education, there were problems in applied courses and professional placements during the pandemic period, but as the pandemic response intensified, students continued to take these classes. The practice of nursing students in hospitals as part of their internship studies alleviated the burden on nurses.

K17: The support from student nurses has relieved a lot of pressure on us in terms of work intensity.

Among the interesting findings were the anecdotes in which they stated that they received support, opinions, and help from their colleagues in different countries because the pandemic is global in scope and there are similar experiences in each country.

K24: During the process, we received help, support, and opinions from our colleagues in other countries through social media.

### Getting Used to the Process

Most of the problems faced by nurses were solved over time through regulation of the system, external support, and professional help. Unresolved problems were also ignored and after a while they were no longer a problem. Over time, nurses began to develop empathy by communicating better with patients and colleagues. This situation had a positive effect on the patients.

K1: We were panicking because we did not know what was coming at the beginning of the process, but now we have gotten used to it and are creating good communication by making patients believe that they will get better.

K30: I tried to communicate better with the patients every day.

Nurses reported overcoming feelings of loneliness and isolation by starting to follow practices and research in other countries. Scanning the literature and reading current articles also contributed to their professional development.

K4: I follow current articles by searching the literature frequently.

The nurses who stated that they have become accustomed to the increasing pace of work over time explained that they feel more

confident now that they have witnessed some important developments in the health care system.

K20: Because of the shortage of nurses, we were used to working at a fast pace.

K22: The regularity of antigen and PCR testing and the regulation of vaccination conditions gave us confidence.

During this period, efforts were made to address the material deficiencies over time and to strengthen the measures at entry and exit to strengthen the system.

## Discussion

There are studies from different countries that support the findings of the research. Morley et al. [11] focused on the ethical principles of nurses and mentioned that nurses will give humane reactions especially to patients who suffer. The opinion in this study also supports the anecdote about intubated patients stated by K19 under the sub-theme of 'Personal and Social Problems'. Shen et al. [12] mentioned the psychological situations that nurses encounter. In the findings obtained in this article, it is mentioned that the nurses are worried about their families, and because they are faced with a long and long workload, they are depressed. The findings of the article support the problems that emerged in the research. This is clearly seen in the anecdotes of participants such as K10 and K6. Within the scope of the study by Aksoy and Koçak [13], which showed the psychological effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on nurses, in which quantitative research methods were used, it was revealed that nurses were exposed to intense psychological problems and had difficulty in producing solutions.

In the study of Buheji and Buhaid [14], it was stated that nurses turned to social media according to the type and level of the situations they faced and received help from other nurses and health workers. In this context, in the anecdote quoted by K24, he mentioned that they reach their colleagues from different countries through social media.

In the cross-sectional study of nurses by Labrague and de los Santos [15], the COVID-19 Fear Scale was used and it was seen that there is a direct correlation between the increase in the scale scores and the increase in psychological distress scores. In the anecdote given by K13 from the nurse participants, the fact that they thought about the time when there would be covid shows that the findings of both studies overlap.

Aydın and Ağaçdiken [16], in their study to examine the connection between colleague solidarity and burnout syndrome in nurses during the pandemic period, reported that cooperation between colleagues would reduce burnout syndrome and that these two concepts were inversely proportional to each other. In this sense, it can be said that the sub-theme of "Colleague Support" obtained in the solution of the problems constitutes the whole of important findings.

## Limitations

This study is limited to the participation of 30 nurses working in different regions of Northern Cyprus in January 2022. It is limited to the situations experienced by the nurses from 10/03/2020, the date when the pandemic first appeared in Northern Cyprus, to the date of data collection.

## Conclusion

The island state of Northern Cyprus is becoming more interesting by the day due to its international student potential and tourist infrastructure, and its population is growing year by year. For this reason, the hospitals connected to the current healthcare system cannot meet the needs of the growing population and it is difficult to manage exceptional situations. In this context, Northern Cyprus, which has a very low number of cases compared to the population and especially to the number of deaths, has achieved a remarkable success with its staff below the needs and has the lowest losses. Based on the results, it is necessary to strengthen the health system, recruit health personnel and build new hospitals and service buildings.

## Patents

Not applicable. No patents have resulted from this research.

### Supplementary Materials

No supplementary materials are associated with this article.

### Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Cyprus Science University (Approval No: 2022/1). The study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles for research involving human participants. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process.

### Author Contributions

Mehmet Zeki Avcı: Conceptualization, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, data curation, writing—original draft preparation, and writing—review and editing. The author has read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

### Funding

Funding information was not specified in the submitted manuscript.

### Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Ethics Committee of Cyprus Science University (Approval No: 2022/1). The research involved 30 nurses working in public hospitals in Northern Cyprus. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their voluntary participation, confidentiality, and

anonymity were ensured throughout the data collection and analysis processes.

**Informed Consent Statement**

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the study. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were assured that their personal information would remain confidential. To protect their identities, participants were assigned anonymous identification codes (K1–K30), and no personally identifiable information was disclosed in the research findings.

**Data Availability Statement**

The data supporting the findings of this study were collected through semi-structured interviews with 30 nurses working in public hospitals in Northern Cyprus in January 2022. Due to the qualitative nature of the research and the need to protect participants' confidentiality, the interview transcripts are not publicly available. Requests for access to anonymized research data may be directed to the corresponding author and will be considered in accordance with applicable ethical requirements and participant confidentiality.

**Acknowledgments**

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to the nurses who voluntarily participated in this study and shared their professional experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their contributions provided valuable insights into the challenges faced by healthcare professionals and the strategies developed to address these difficulties.

**Conflicts of Interest**

The author's conflict-of-interest declaration was not specified in the submitted manuscript.

**Abbreviations**

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

| Abbreviation | Full Term |
|---|---|
| COVID-19 | Coronavirus Disease 2019 |
| WHO | World Health Organization |
| PCR | Polymerase Chain Reaction |

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