In January 2021, the International Council of Nurses (ICN) drew the world’s attention to the evidence showing mental health issues and physiological impacts on nurses as a result of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. ICN called this phenomena the “mass traumatisation” of the global nursing workforce and called on governments to act now to support nurses and address these issues. The COVID effect is real and risks damaging the nursing profession for generations to come.

Close to 80% of ICN’s national nursing associations (NNAs) that responded have received reports of mental health distress from nurses working in the COVID-19 response.

ICN estimates the COVID-19 Effect, added to the current shortages and ageing of the nursing workforce, could lead to a potential shortfall of up to 13 million nurses by 2030.

The longer-term impacts of COVID-19 including PTSD and long COVID are currently unknown but could be extremely significant.

About 20% of nurses in Japan reported they had experienced discrimination or prejudice amid the spread of the virus. In the US, 64% of nurses felt overwhelmed and 67% reported difficulty in sleeping.

NNA reports highlight that the causes of mental health distress are complex and varied and include inadequate PPE, the fear of spreading the virus, high workloads, increase in violence and discrimination against nurses, post-traumatic stress symptoms, etc.