

Royal College of Nursing Submission: Preparations for Coronavirus Inquiry, 6th April 2020

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) is the largest trade union and professional body in the world, representing 450,000 members across the UK.

Nursing staff working in hospitals, community care and in people's own homes throughout the UK, have been unstinting in their dedication and professionalism to protecting the health and wellbeing of our population as the COVID-19 crisis evolves.

The two biggest concerns for our members in relation to COVID-19 are around their own personal safety and the safety of their patients and own families: Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and COVID-19 testing for health and care staff. Both these issues must be acted upon rapidly and robustly so that it is without doubt that the safety of staff and the public is paramount in this crisis.

The challenges presented by COVID-19 will only add to the staffing pressures already faced by our health and care system in their efforts to provide safe and effective care. We continue to call for the expansion of accountability for workforce provision in law and investment in nursing higher education in England. A commitment in law is more relevant now, in crisis, to provide assurance to our nursing community that our workforce problems are going to be fixed in the future.

Personal protective equipment (PPE)

Throughout this pandemic, nursing staff have consistently raised and been unheard in their requirements for adequate supplies of PPE that meet the required specifications which is vital to support them to do their jobs safely. Without adequate and proper PPE, nursing staff are putting their own lives, the lives of their families and patients, at risk. This situation is unconscionable.

We call for access to adequate supplies of PPE that meets the required safety and efficacy standards, including hand sanitiser for nursing, midwifery and social care staff for use at the point of care, in all care settings.

Adequate supplies of PPE

There are recognised problems of distributing PPE to staff working in settings on a local basis, despite the UK Government and health agencies knowing that PPE would be required for all staff in the weeks before the crisis took hold.

We recognise that Governments across the UK, health agencies and other bodies have been working to resolve distribution issues. However, actions to mitigate PPE distribution is regarded by our members to have been too slow and not transparent. Public commitments have not translated into increases in consistently deployed and accessible stocks of adequate PPE, across all health and care settings, regardless of provider. This has resulted in anxiety and fear at an already challenging time for nursing staff.

While it is the case that our members across many health and care settings do not have what they need, this is especially the case for RCN members working in health and care, General Practice and other settings including care homes, who report that they have either no or poor access to PPE, and no hand sanitiser. The wider health and care system, outside of acute NHS hospitals, continue to provide care to vulnerable people in society, yet there has been a disproportionate focus on ensuring supplies only for NHS hospitals. This is alarming and cannot continue.

Clinically approved PPE

Due to inadequate supplies of PPE for staff, there are reports that members have been required to re-use equipment, to use equipment previously marked as out of date, to clean down old gowns with alcohol wipes and to use alternative equipment donated for protection. While public donations of supplies are signals of their support to frontline staff, these gifts do not replace the responsibility system leaders and Governments have to ensure that correct PPE is provided. Health and care organisations that accept donations of PPE also have a legal responsibility to ensure that equipment meets the required specifications to protect staff.

Our members are reporting that the insufficient supplies of PPE have resulted in the equipment available to them being of an unsatisfactory standard. FFP3 respirator masks - which offer the highest level of protection as they can block liquid and solid aerosols containing virus particles - require users to undergo FIT testing to ensure that the equipment is adjusted correctly for their personal use. The provision of a different product to the type normally used will require all users of FFP3 masks to undergo additional FIT testing in order to use the new product. Where different brands of FFP3 masks are provided in succession, the FIT testing of all staff will be repeatedly required. Some members are reporting that equipment to undertake the FIT testing is not available. This creates additional pressure and delays for staff and the system at this critical time.

The provision of insufficient and inadequate PPE is a direct breach by NHS and social care employers as they are failing to follow statutory obligations in relation to PPE. In an open letter to the Chief Executive of the Health and Safety Executive, we have called for their intervention to ensure the adequate availability of FIT testing, and that employers comply with Regulation 4 of the PPE at Work regulations (1992) which stipulates '*that suitable PPE must be provided to employees who may be exposed to a risk to their health and safety while at work.*'ⁱ The terms of the situation are extremely serious. All staff, irrespective of the setting in which they work, must have access to FIT testing and adequate supplies of PPE now and throughout the duration of this crisis.

Guidance on use of PPE

Throughout this pandemic, there has been little clarity on when or how PPE should be used effectively to keep staff and patients safe, which is unacceptable. There has also been continued confusion following discrepancies in PPE guidance by the agencies responsible for infection prevention and control in England, the UK and across the globe. We acknowledge the recent UK-wide publication of guidance for PPE for all health and care staff fighting the COVID-19 outbreak which extends original guidance to cover health and care working in community, mental health and social care settingsⁱⁱ. As such, we are satisfied with the guidance and will be monitoring the situation with regards to the evidence of its efficacy and use. The success of this guidance will be judged by its implementation and communication. At time of writing, there remain serious issues to consistent access of PPE across health and care settings.

COVID-19 testing for health and care staff

We call for testing for all health and care professionals to allow for better staff planning and public confidence.

Health and care workers are being exposed to COVID-19 in their workplaces and in their communities. The UK and devolved governments must prioritise testing of all health and care staff urgently and we welcome UK Government ambitions to achieve 100,000 COVID-19 tests per day and everything possible must be done to meet this goal.

Testing to identify health and care professionals symptomatic with possible COVID-19 is also vital in supporting infection prevention and control decisions, including the necessary use of PPE and the correct isolation of patients. Our health and care workforce need the ability to exclude or confirm COVID-19 cases within their own teams, so that staff are not self-isolating unnecessarily. Widespread testing also protects the families of health and care workers enabling them to take informed action to mitigate their risk, helping to allay fear experienced by our members. To support future workforce planning and to give individuals confidence that they no longer pose a potential risk to their patients, families and dependents, antibody testing must be urgently available.

A universal approach to testing will provide data which can be analysed and used to support decisions on how best to ensure that patient care can continue to be provided safely and effectively. It is unacceptable that health and care staff are not being tested for COVID-19 and the UK Government must roll out testing at pace and scale. Nursing staff are working relentlessly throughout this pandemic. They require clarity and urgent action from the UK Government and employers to protect them as they carry out their duties.

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ⁱ RCN, *An open letter to Sarah Albon, Chief Executive of the Health and Safety Executive*, 31st March 2020. Available here: <https://www.rcn.org.uk/covid-19/rcn-open-letters>

ⁱⁱ UK Government guidance, *covid-19 personal protective equipment (PPE)*, 2nd April 2020. Available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/wuhan-novel-coronavirus-infection-prevention-and-control/covid-19-personal-protective-equipment-ppe>