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Professor N. Phin
Deputy Director
PHE National Infections
by email

26th March 2020

Dear Professor Phin,

I am writing to you, as President of HCSA, to echo my statement made on BBC Newsnight, 25th March 2020, regarding the Public Health England (PHE) Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) guidance.

On behalf of front-line hospital doctors I request that you urgently review and update the PHE guidance on PPE currently available on the Government website. This is rapidly being superseded by sub-specialty Associations and Royal Colleges as more clinical evidence becomes apparent from China, Italy and Spain of the transmission of Covid-19 by asymptomatic carriers and those shedding virus prior to becoming symptomatic and those that have recovered from symptoms but continue to shed the virus.

On February 13th the Lancet published an article on protecting healthcare workers from subclinical Corona virus citing evidence from China, that non-symptomatic people can spread Covid-19 with high efficiency and that conventional measures of protection, such as face masks, are insufficient. It indicated, based on the evolving evidence of the viral activity and pathology, protective measures should be as for category A infections and not category B as currently practised in the UK.

This has been further confirmed in subsequent articles and by a review of evidence from Italy by the PanSurg international collaborative created at Imperial College, published on 25th March 2020.

As many as 10-15% of covid-19 cases are health care workers in Italy, 14% in Spain. Dozens of health care workers have died across Europe and large numbers are having to self-isolate.

Staff are the greatest asset to the NHS and everything must be done to preserve their safety in order to maintain the effective running of the service.

It is clear from a snapshot survey on Covid-19 undertaken with HCSA members on 23rd March that over 80% of more than 500 respondents did not feel safe in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, with 69.2% of the respondents not considering the current PHE guidance to be sufficient, and 34% voting that their Trusts are not adhering fully to PHE guidance, whilst other members stated that PPE is being rationed within their Trusts.

ENT(UK), British Association of Oral and Maxillo-facial Surgeons (BAOS) and Royal College of Surgeons (RCS) have amended the PHE guidance for their own specialties. In theatres and for intubation, adaptations have evolved including double gloving. Procedures including nasogastric tube insertion and basic examination of the oro-naso pharynx are now deemed to be aerosol-generating procedures, but not yet in the PHE guidance.

The professional association and trade union for hospital doctors, wherever you are in your career

As a consultant anaesthetist myself and having instructed on PPE and its donning and doffing, it is clear there are areas that need addressing even within the current guidance.

In full PPE, despite a visor and gown, the neck remains exposed and therefore at risk of contamination. Hair is tied but not deemed to need cover, even in full PPE, again at risk of contamination. Both these areas could cause infection through later transference of the virus. Shoes are not referred to but may also become contaminated with bodily fluids or sputum. Gloves provided are short and loose fitting offering little protection to the wrist area. FFP3 masks arrive from a variety of different manufacturers in an unplanned manner, requiring repeat fit-testing, often multiple times, or the risk of incomplete protection.

Covid-19 has arrived in the UK. With the evidence supporting asymptomatic virus transmission, and without the sufficient testing capability of either antigen or antibody, it is not possible to identify accurately all Covid-19 patients. The social distancing being undertaken by the government of our nation assumes that everyone is a potential carrier, yet we do not practice social distancing within our hospitals, nor are we adequately protecting our staff with the current guidance.

We request that you mandate full PPE of appropriate standard according to category A infections for staff in all Covid-19 positive areas, Emergency Departments, theatres, radiology, wards and Intensive care.

We urge you to ensure that all staff and patients within the hospital are mandated to wear surgical masks both in clinical and non-clinical areas, as evidenced from the Italian transmission to staff being greater in non-Covid areas, reflecting the high degree of asymptomatic spread.

We urge you to urgently review and increase the robustness of the current PHE guidance in light of the evolving evidence around the pandemic to reassure and protect our valuable and essential workforce.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Claudia Paoloni', written in a cursive style.

Dr Claudia Paoloni BSc Mb BS FRCA
President, HCSA