

Global recognition that COVID-19 is airborne shows UK is lagging behind.

Infection control guidance and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) provision are out of date and are placing health and care staff at risk, an alliance of health professional bodies, Royal Colleges and trade unions said today.

The concern comes as news of the spread of new variants of concern, especially an Indian variant in parts of the North West and London, raise the prospect of a further wave of cases.

The alliance members, which include the Royal College of Nursing, AGP Alliance and Fresh Air NHS, wrote publicly to Prime Minister Boris Johnson in February 2021 to express their concerns. They say the response they received from Number 10 failed to recognise the growing evidence that the virus can be spread in tiny particles known as aerosols.

New statements from the government's own Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), the [World Health Organisation \(WHO\)](#) and the US Government Centre for Disease Control all recognise the role of airborne transmission, yet UK guidance only recommends the use of higher grade FFP3 respiratory masks (which can block aerosols) for a limited range of procedures. Conservative Health & Social Care Select Committee Chair, Jeremy Hunt MP, has also publicly acknowledged that COVID-19 is airborne.

It is now well established that spread of COVID-19 will be much worse in crowded areas, indoor spaces (especially with poor ventilation) or places with large numbers of infected individuals. This makes hospitals and other health and care settings particularly high risk, and also applies to indoor spaces outside of a hospital or care home setting – such as in the back of an ambulance or when caring for patients in crowded or poorly ventilated homes.

Change is needed urgently to help regain the trust of an exhausted health and care workforce, they argue, and government cannot rely solely on the vaccine roll-out to protect health and care staff.

Rose Gallagher MBE, Professional Lead for Infection Prevention and Control at the Royal College of Nursing, who coordinated the letter to the Prime Minister, said "The response from the Prime Minister's office is very disappointing. The policy it outlines is significantly out of date, and the UK is now lagging significantly behind other countries in our approach to PPE and infection control.

"In other countries they have already been using higher-grade FFP3 masks for months and their death rates are accordingly much lower than the UK, where hundreds of HCP have died and tens of thousands have been off work at any one time."

In the same week that the Indian variant of the coronavirus has been identified as "of concern", Gallagher warned against sole reliance on the vaccination programme; "Despite current success in reducing infections in the general population, not all staff have been vaccinated and no vaccine is 100% effective. The threat of new variants is very real and a third wave is predicted, so we must not assume the pandemic is behind us."

Dr Barry Jones, Chair of the AGP Alliance, said; "We have long argued that COVID-19 was being spread through the air, and that as a result we need a higher standard of PPE irrespective of whether delivering an Aerosol Generating Procedure (AGP) or not. It is simply currently not possible for hospitals to adequately ventilate all their indoor spaces, so appropriate masks are vital. Current guidance recommends only surgical masks for most health and care staff, but these are not designed to block aerosols and are clearly not sufficient."