

Open Letter to Scottish Government/Health Secretary

The current Coronavirus pandemic sweeping the world has caused major upheaval wherever it has struck and Scotland is no different. Almost overnight our day to day lives have been turned upside down and it is causing fear and anxiety up and down the country. This has been especially exacerbated by images from Italy and Spain and there is certainly an expectation amongst health care professionals that we will most likely follow a similar course.

The 'frontline' battle against this invisible enemy is being fought by dedicated health care professionals including doctors, nurses and pharmacists both in hospital and out in the community. These health care workers harbour the same anxieties and fears that many in the country have about Covid 19 and worry greatly about spreading it between patients and to their own loved ones. The only thing that can protect these valuable assets in this battle is the provision of adequate and sufficient Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

Whilst some PPE has now been provided we believe many health care professionals have grave concerns about the adequacy of what has been given. This coronavirus has only been known to science for the past 3-4 months – there is much about it we do not know accurately including whether there is any airborne spread, how infectious are asymptomatic patients, are there any long term health issues associated with being infected amongst many questions which still need answered.

What is certain at the moment however is that health care workers are falling ill and dying here in the UK due to Covid 19. We believe that it is vital that all these essential workers are given adequate protective equipment at the very least, to protect themselves and in turn their patients from this new virus. At present, with current PPE we believe that the risk of becoming infected and/or passing infection between patients as a consequence of inadequate protection is simply too great.

Presently what has been provided in primary care (and many areas of secondary care) has been thin plastic aprons which cover very little of the wearers body, surgical masks which have been shown only to be protective against large droplet spread but not to smaller droplets or anything airborne and flimsy eye cover which does not provide enough protection. Even the World Health Organisation guidelines state a surgical gown is a minimum. But here in Scotland we should be doing so much better for our dedicated health care workers who are risking their wellbeing daily to help combat this potentially fatal virus.

We believe that the distinction drawn in the guidelines re aerosol generating procedures and wearing of enhanced PPE only when dealing with this, whilst superficially having some weight is not persuasive. Patients will be coughing and sneezing and passing the virus on from their clothes and hair etc. This has the same bearing in the community as it does in hospital. Also with the impending need for increased palliative care in the community appropriate PPE is vital.

There are similar concerns about adequacy of PPE in many areas of secondary care and also by pharmacists who are seeing patients who attend their pharmacies.

In past pandemics it has been clearly demonstrated that the fastest most efficient way of dealing with it is to ensure the safety of the health care workers and not to make them vectors for the disease. Not only that but these workers must have confidence in the equipment they are using and that is simply not the case at present.