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## **Suffolk NHS Pay Justice Hub Calls for Immediate Review of PPE in Light of New Strain of Covid-19.**

*New strain poses enhanced risk to staff members working in the NHS.*

**Suffolk NHS Pay Justice Hub** are a grassroots collective based in Suffolk. We are part of the wider 'NHS Workers Say No!' movement. We are calling for an urgent review of the current Public Health England (PHE) guidance regarding personal protective equipment (PPE) use for NHS frontline staff particularly after a new, more transmissible strain of Covid-19 has been identified. We are calling for this action following brave staff coming forward to us, highly concerned about the provision and guidance surrounding the use of PPE, that they feel is substandard and puts them at an unacceptable risk of contracting Covid-19 at work.

Covid-19 is a novel coronavirus with evidence showing it behaves similar to SARS. Its modes of transmission are large droplets, small aerosol droplets, and contamination of surfaces. In 2003, the World Health Organisation (WHO) released guidance for staff caring for patients with SARS. These recommendations included several infection control procedures, but most notably, the use of respirator (FFP3 or N95) masks.

PHE updated their PPE recommendations on 20<sup>th</sup> October 2020. The recommendation is for staff working with Covid-19 suspected or confirmed positive patients (other than those involved in aerosol generating procedures [AGPs]) are to wear 'fluid resistant surgical masks' (Public Health England, 2020). A report published in The Lancet (Fennelly, 2020) looked at the efficacy of surgical masks. Modelling and simulated workplace studies showed that there is 'little to no protection from surgical masks' with regards to blocking virus particles. The report referenced a UK study that found that surgical masks could reduce aerosol exposure by two times, but filtering respirators reduced exposure by a factor of 100 or higher.

Additional to this study, surgical masks are not certified or regulated as devices for respiratory protection.

Studies have shown that Covid-19 droplets can become airborne for prolonged periods of time meaning all healthcare and hospital staff are at risk when working in enclosed wards with Covid-19 infected patients.

Therefore, we are calling on local NHS Hospital Trusts – including the Trusts in Suffolk comprising the West Suffolk Hospital, Norfolk and Suffolk Foundation Trust, and East Suffolk and North Essex Foundation Trust (incorporating Ipswich Hospital and Colchester Hospital) (ESNEFT) - and unions including the RCN, RCM, RCOG, GMB, Unite, Unison and more, to back our call for an urgent review into the guidance on PPE.

PHE advises that to maintain effective infection control, staff should maintain a 2-metre distance from each other and from patients. But the very nature of the role of nurses and doctors means this is impossible. Wards are poorly ventilated with closed windows and doors, both of which increase the number of airborne virus particles.

There is evidence that PHE changed guidance early on in the Covid-19 crisis, not because they believed they were providing guidance based on best evidence, but due to a chronic shortage of the required respirator masks.

We believe a review now would be the perfect opportunity to offer NHS staff the protection they deserve. It would reduce spread within the hospital, making it safer for both staff and patients. Despite following the infection control procedures set out by PHE, staff members at ESNEFT are still contracting Covid-19, and we strongly believe this to be because of the lack of protection offered by surgical masks. We believe staff safety should be paramount whilst at work, and they are being badly failed by their employers, PHE, and the Government.

Suffolk NHS Pay Justice Hub are backed in this call to action by Teresa MacKay, President of the Ipswich and District Trades Union Council (TUC).

## References

Fennelly, K. P., 2020. Particle sizes of infectious aerosols; implications for infection control. *The Lancet*, Volume 8, pp. 914-924.

Public Health England, 2020. *Covid-19: Guidance for the remobilisation of services within health and care settings. Infection prevention and control recommendations*. [Online]

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