



Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation
Cumann Altraí agus Ban Cabhrach na hÉireann
Working Together

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General Secretary
Phil NiSheaghda

PNiS/CC

3rd April 2020

Dr Colm Henry
Chief Clinical Officer
Dr Steevens Hospital
Dublin 8

By email to: cco@hse.ie

Re: Note on Recommendations to use surgical masks for all patient encounters and meetings between staff where social distancing (2 metres) cannot be maintained.

Dear Dr Henry,

I refer to the attached note which Prof Martin Cormican issued to the system on 28.03.2020 resulting from recommendation to wear Surgical masks in St James Hospital.

While we appreciate the intent of the note to ensure a consistent approach to PPE, there are a number of difficulties that remain in practice and which are causing major concern to our nursing and midwifery members. We would also ask that you note feedback from our South Korea, Taiwan and Chinese colleagues via their national associations affiliated to International Council of Nurses, that general wearing of masks was beneficial to containing the spread of Covid-19.

We note the reference to the WHO guidelines and to their concern that overuse of PPE would have further impact on supply shortages. While supply remains a concern, it cannot be used to dilute patient and staff safety. The WHO generally advise the public: *'Only wear a mask if you are ill with COVID-19 symptoms (especially coughing) or looking after someone who may have COVID-19'*.

The issues we raise are on behalf of Health care workers where there is an indication that the patients, they are caring for **may have** Covid-19.

We note the concern expressed relating to symptomatic health care workers continuing to attend work;- *'The message needs to be very clear and consistent with current national HSE guidance that symptomatic healthcare workers should not attend for work but should be assessed and tested if appropriate'*- this a concern we share and we are very clear with our members and with HR /HSE that there should be no circumstances where this occurs.

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However, the problem in Ireland is that testing is delayed due to shortage of testing controls and therefore it is not possible to conclude that patients, co-workers or indeed workers themselves are Covid-19 negative. We do know that asymptomatic people can in fact be positive.

The note states that '*There is some uncertainty regarding the extent to which infected but asymptomatic people may disperse infectious droplets*'

In respect of this conclusion, the very uncertainty surrounding the transmission of this virus is itself a fact, and this causes great concern. As the representative organisation for the largest single group of health care workers who are acquiring this virus, in a health care setting, we believe that we must err on the side of caution.

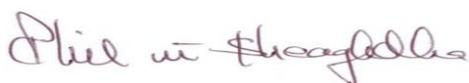
As you are aware, in the nature of nursing and midwifery care, it is not possible to maintain 2 meter distances in the course of care provision, and while we accept the point you make in respect of correct use and disposal of surgical masks, we submit that our members as trained and committed professionals are strictly following the guidelines issued by the HSE and WHO in this regard.

Therefore as the correct use is not in question the advice of the HSE must in the interest of staff and patient protection, in our view, (considering the degree of uncertainty that exists re transmission, coupled with delays in testing), now recommend:

The universal use of surgical masks be adopted with a view to preventing transmission of infection and in this context, it is essential that the masks are used appropriately as per standard guidance on surgical mask use in this context.

Thank you for your attention to this note.

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PHIL NÍ SHEAGHDHA
General Secretary

cc:

Prof Martin Cormican, HSE National Lead for Health Care Associated Infection and Antimicrobial Resistance
Geraldine Shaw, Area Director of Nursing and Midwifery ONMSD
Rachel Kenna, Deputy Chief Nursing Officer