

Protection of healthcare workers should be a priority: let's address together the shortages of protective materials in our hospitals!



Open letter on COVID19 to the head of European Institutions and member states

- Charles Michel, President of the European Council
- Stella Kyriakides, Commissioner for Health and Food Safety – European Commission
- Thierry Breton, Commissioner for internal market
- Janez Lenarčič, Commissioner for Crisis Management
- cc: Wolfgang Philipp, Head of Unit SANTE C3

Brussels, 16 March 2020

Urgent need for solidarity and coordination in delivering protective equipment for healthcare workers

Dear President of the Council of the European Union, Dear Commissioners,

We are writing to you to share our concerns about the situation facing public service workers at the forefront of the management of the COVID-19 emergency. As the European trade union federation organising healthcare and public service workers, we are working with our affiliates to ensure the safety of health workers tackling the COVID-19 outbreak.

Europe is currently facing serious and increasing disruption to the supply of personal protective equipment caused by rising demand, panic buying, hoarding and misuse. Healthcare workers rely on this equipment (such as gloves, medical masks, respirators, goggles, face shields, gowns and aprons) to protect themselves and their patients from being infected and infecting others. **It is essential to coordinate the production of such material across Europe**, making sure that we can meet the needs of our healthcare workforce. According to the WHO, 89 million medical masks are required for the COVID-19 response each month.

We note with deep concern the decision of several member states to limit and in some cases even block, the exports of supplies to other member states. This possible shortage in protective equipment and medicines, including also intensive care devices, seriously undermines the capacity of EU healthcare systems to deal with the COVID-19 crisis.

We call on member states, in particular Germany, France and the Czech Republic, **to boost the production and unblock the export of protective equipment to the maximum level possible, sharing and coordinating their supplies with other EU members.**

We acknowledge the issuing of the joint tender for protective equipment for 20 EU countries: it is essential to speed up procedures to ensure and maintain continuity of supply. Member state cooperation is essential to make sure the procedure is finalised in a timely manner. Industry and governments must act quickly to boost supply, ease export restrictions and put measures in place to stop speculation and hoarding. We also expect the EU and member states to develop incentives for industry to increase production.

The responsibility for the health and safety of our members, and healthcare workers, lies with employers and health ministers. Healthcare workers must have fit-tested personal protective equipment. Employers must provide training and support and workers must be mandated to do risk assessments. This allows the healthcare workers to assess their risk and act accordingly.

Shortages of personal protective equipment are occurring. Employers should work with the trade unions, as with governments and the public health authorities, to have strategies and plans in place to reduce hazardous exposure and keep our frontline workers safe. Let us not forget that during this pandemic our members are working and caring for all, risking their health and safety to contain the spread of the virus and deal with its victims.

Our health care systems work when doctors, nurses, health professionals, health care assistants, auxiliary staff, cleaners, food caterers, ambulance drivers and so many more, are able to deal with patients and keep us safe. That is why they need protection. Be safe rather than sorry. Be bold rather than piecemeal.

We expect the Commission and Member States to reinforce these messages.

The coronavirus has posed a serious challenge to Europe's capacity to coordinate an effective response to such a major threat. We believe that if the measures we are calling for are implemented then it will be a significant step towards a united response to the biggest challenge our public health service and healthcare workers have faced.

Yours faithfully,

Jan Willem Goudriaan,

EPSU General Secretary

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