

To:

- Stella Kyriakides, Commissioner for Health and Food Safety – European Commission
- Nicolas Schmit, Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights
- Janez Lenarčič, Commissioner for Crisis Management
- Wolfgang Philipp, Head of Unit SANTE C3

Brussels, 27 February 2020

### **Re: Impact of Coronavirus Outbreaks On Health Care Workers**

Dear Commissioners,

I'm writing to you on behalf of EPSU the European trade union federation representing health workers and in coordination with our Italian affiliates. We want to share our concerns with you about the situation facing public service workers at the forefront of the management of the COVID-19 emergency.

We are available at the earliest opportunity to discuss how the European Commission can address five crucial issues:

- ensuring the full and prompt availability of personal protective equipment;
- reinforcing the coordination and the uniform application of safety protocols and health guidelines;
- tackling healthcare staff shortages;
- dealing with critical factors related to the health and well-being of medical personnel; and
- reinforcing coordination and communication among member states.

Healthcare workers are particularly vulnerable for several reasons: first, the coronavirus is highly contagious and medical workers are exposed to more viral particles than the general public. Second, problems are being exacerbated because of understaffing and shortages of supplies as the tide of patients rises. Third, a combination of stress and long hours can make health workers' immune systems more vulnerable than normal.

On 24 February, the National Health Commission in China said that more than 3,000 healthcare workers nationwide had been infected. This demonstrates clearly the vulnerability of medical personnel on the frontline of the current COVID-19 outbreak.

For these reasons, we believe it is essential and imperative, in addition to the appropriate measures taken at member state level, that the Commission acts to ensure implementation of the measures essential to guarantee the safety of health workers and the continuity of public and emergency services in line with the measures and protocols agreed during the extraordinary EPSCO council of the 13<sup>th</sup> of February.

We propose that the Commission considers the following elements while supporting governments to ensure a strong overall level of preparedness for this and future health crises:

- Ensure the full and prompt availability of personal protective equipment (PPE): Compliance with standards of PPE use is important for disease prevention. Our affiliates, particularly in Italy, are reporting shortages of PPE. This is why it is imperative to include in the Personal Protective Equipment Directive 89/686/EEC emergency mechanisms in case of emergency to ensure immediate provision and availability of such equipment for hospitals and medical staff.
- Reinforce the coordination and the uniform application of safety protocols and health guidelines in all hospitals in Europe: A well-equipped and healthy workforce is critical to ensuring the resilience of our public health in cases of emergency. The health workforce should be an integral part of national and international public health preparedness plans. In this framework, we underline the obligation of all national member states and hospitals management to put in place all the necessary measures to ensure that safety protocols are available in all hospitals and that all professionals are properly trained to work in accordance with them. At the moment, our unions are reporting the application of different protocols not only between member states, but also between different hospitals and regions in the same country. This potentially creates gaps in the safety infrastructure needed to protect staff involved in the crisis. We also consider it essential that national governments and the European Commission further enforce occupational safety and health guidelines in their Integrated Situation Awareness and Analysis (ISAA), beginning with infection prevention and control strategies to protect health care workers.
- Tackle the healthcare staff shortages: we cannot avoid noting once again how our capacity to respond to this emergency is severely challenged by serious staff shortages in healthcare, in particular for those services that represent the first line of defense against any epidemic or pandemic (eg. the emergency services, ambulance services and general practitioners). In particular, our Italian affiliates report that hospitals face shortages of medical personnel leaving them unable to keep up with the large influx of patients. This shows once again the importance of investing in the infrastructure needed to forecast the demands on health care workers during such outbreaks. We therefore call on the European Commission to continue to strengthen the models that forecast the availability of health personnel, existing and predicted changes in demand, and strategies for deployment of additional workers in emergency situations. The lack of staff across the EU further underlines the continuing impact of austerity measures that have undermined public health systems. The forthcoming review of the Economic Semester needs to take this into account as the Commission continues to demand austerity from countries like Italy but does not acknowledge its impact.
- Address critical factors related to the health and well-being of medical personnel, including stress management and fatigue. As the WHO highlights, fatigue and psychosocial stress are among the most common risks to safety and health in emergencies. Its recommendations for reducing fatigue include implementing policies on working hours, duration and rotation of shifts and rest periods, as well as advance measures to prevent fatigue involving delegation of responsibilities, support services, and contingency planning. We expect strong responses of the European Commission and Member States, public authorities and hospitals against possible discrimination against workers of another country from Asian descent for example. No messages of hate should be tolerated.
- Reinforce coordination and communication among member states: we call on the European Commission, member states and health care institutions to ensure a clear

system for coordination and communication with frontline workers so that staff are kept apprised of the current recommendations.

In conclusion, we believe that the COVID-19 crisis gives us the possibility to reflect and act to reduce to the lowest level possible the impact of infectious disease outbreaks on health care workers and reflect on strategies for building a robust health workforce that is fully equipped to respond to health crises. Governments, health care institutions, and other stakeholders should strive to learn the lessons of previous outbreaks to improve the care of health care workers and target innovations to the health workforce. As the COVID-19 virus continues to spread, the health care workers who are dedicating their lives to helping others should receive the support that they deserve.

We are available to meet with the European Commission and in particular with DG SANTE – C.3 (Crisis management and preparedness in health unit) to report the concern of our affiliates and provide our support to the ongoing efforts to ensure that all the measures are in place to overcome this and any future outbreak.

Kind regards,



Jan Willem Goudriaan  
EPSU General Secretary