

NHS staff contract COVID-19 as UK government refuses to provide testing and protective equipment

Tony Robson
25 March 2020

The Conservative government's failure to provide testing and protective equipment for National Health Service (NHS) staff has resulted in the first cases of doctors and nurses contracting COVID-19 in the UK while performing their frontline duties.

Their lives have been placed unnecessarily at risk and they are now on ventilators, which they would otherwise have used to treat critically ill patients struck down by the virus. They have been removed from emergency response, which even in the initial stages of the outbreak is being overwhelmed.

This is the inevitable outcome of the criminal negligence of the Boris Johnson government and its key scientific and medical advisors, who two weeks ago advocated allowing infections to spread in order to create "herd immunity." The government's chief scientific adviser, Sir Patrick Vallance, went on record at the time, stating, "It's not possible to stop everyone getting it [COVID-19] and it's also *not desirable* because you want some immunity in the population to protect ourselves in the future." [Emphasis added].

The implications of this policy are now being felt in hospitals around the country.

In the West Midlands, one of the main hotspots in the UK for the virus outside of London, a staff nurse has been taken into intensive care at Walsall Manor hospital, where she works. She is on a ventilator after testing positive for COVID-19.

The 36-year-old mother of three, Areema Nasreen, had no pre-existing medical conditions. Her sister, Kazeema, informed *Birmingham Live* that Areema had been ill for some seven days, with symptoms including a soaring temperature, body aches and a cough, before the decision was made for her to be tested.

In London, three junior doctors, all aged 30, have been taken into critical care and are now on ventilators, according to the *Sun on Sunday*. It is reported that they all worked at the same hospital. The location where they are being treated has not been disclosed.

This follows a fortnight in which doctors and nurses have been raising the alarm regarding the disastrous consequences of NHS staff not being tested while having symptoms of the virus, and not being provided adequate personal protective equipment

(PPE). In addition to the risk of exposure to themselves and their families, this raises the very real prospect that vulnerable patients have been placed at risk.

The official wall of obfuscation with which these concerns were originally greeted has only been breached by doctors and nurses making a direct public appeal. In many instances, those who took this course of action on social media and in the mainstream media did so while retaining their anonymity. The fact that this was necessary speaks to a climate of fear and retribution within the NHS from management after years of underfunding and marketisation.

Others have taken a collective stand. On the BBC's *Andrew Marr Show* Sunday, a doctor—one of 5,000 who signed a letter to the prime minister to protest the lack of PPE—stated: "We've had doctors tell us they feel like lambs to the slaughter, that they feel like cannon fodder. GPs tell us they feel absolutely abandoned."

The letter states, "Intensive care doctors and anaesthetists have told us they have been carrying out the highest-risk procedure, putting a patient on a ventilator, with masks that expired in 2015."

It adds, "Paediatricians have warned their stocks of protective glasses would run out in 48 hours, including in special-care baby units."

It has emerged that at some hospitals frontline staff have even resorted to using bin bags as a substitute for protective aprons. Following pleas over social media about this desperate state of affairs, none of the assembled journalists from the mainstream media at the official government press conference held last Sunday pressed Johnson on the question of PPE or NHS staff testing. Millions see Johnson conducting his press briefings from a lectern bearing the slogan "Protect the NHS" as an affront.

In France, medics have undertaken legal action against the Macron government for its negligence and are seeking the prosecution of top officials.

Three medics filed a legal complaint with France's Cour de Justice de la République (Law Court of the Republic—CJR) against Macron's prime minister, Edouard Philippe, and former

Minister of Solidarity and Health Agnes Buzyn. The CJR rules on cases of ministerial misconduct.

The complaint states that, as early as January, the two ministers were aware of the threat posed by the virus “but refused to act.” Among the evidence they cite is an interview that Buzyn gave to *Le Monde*, in which she expressed regret at leaving her post to stand in the municipal elections, the first round of which was held last Sunday, as a “tsunami” was coming and the elections served as a “masquerade.”

The medics’ lawyer, Fabrice Di Vizio, stated in an interview with *Russia Today*, “At some point the truth needs to be told, which is that these people have been lying to us from the start.

“Last week the government spoke about the masks. You remember those pompous speeches by the president, who was all commander-in-chief in tone and promised the masks. Masks are a primary tool of war since they protect the health workers. Have those masks arrived?”

This first wave of protest has served to reveal how atrophied the conventional channels for resolving elementary and legitimate grievances have become.

The Macron government in France provides an example of how governments around the world are cynically exploiting the crisis to adopt police-state methods of rule. While the entire country is in lockdown and the army deployed to the streets, the health service is starved of basic resources to tackle the health emergency.

The invocation of war-like rhetoric is to justify the tearing up of democratic rights and suppress social discontent, based upon the lying claim that “we are all in this together.” It is also used to promote nationalism, which runs counter to the international co-operation required to tackle the pandemic.

Britain is no exception. In a functional democracy, Johnson’s appearance before MPs at Prime Ministers Questions last week would have been the occasion for him to be confronted with something of the wrath of public opinion. But what unfolded was the opposite. In an act of sheer hypocrisy, the parliamentary benches were largely vacated as MPs heeded advice to practice social distancing—the very measures the government had failed to enact to protect the population weeks earlier.

Jeremy Corbyn, in one of his last acts as Labour Party leader, went through the motions, in a limp and servile performance, of raising concerns about the failure to conduct testing for NHS staff and a host of other issues relating to the lack of a social safety net for the vast majority of society, following the government’s £350 billion bailout to big business.

Johnson was allowed to grandstand, claiming that the UK compared favourably to other countries on coronavirus testing. He felt able to make an empty promise to prioritise NHS staff and increase testing to 25,000 by an unspecified date.

The reality is that the UK compares favourably only to America and Japan. It has already been proven that the government is playing fast and loose with its testing figures.

Last week, NHS England said it was increasing daily testing from 5,000 to 10,000, when according to Sir Patrick Vallance the daily total was only 4,000.

As in every other matter, Johnson felt confident that his government would not be challenged or held to account. For all their meek show of opposition, Corbyn and the Labour Party moved rapidly to rubber stamp Johnson’s authoritarian emergency powers legislation and rush it through Parliament without being voted on.

The mainstream media is well versed in the art of dissembling on behalf of the government and the political establishment. The emergency state measures will be directed against collective action and social protest.

A warning must be sounded. Despite the social distancing advice in place and the lockdown of the country announced Monday evening, there has been no U-turn by the government. In its belated turn on matters such as social distancing, the government sought to deflect responsibility onto the general public.

For days, the headline news was dominated by acts of bulk buying and people socialising in bars and at the seaside. This was all to conceal that it was the government—which for weeks insisted that there was no problem and everyone should happily get infected—that was responsible. It contributed to bulk buying through its refusal to provide any safety net for those who will be left destitute.

The Johnson government and the Labour Party—which for years have disastrously undermined the NHS—are now hypocritically lauding it to the rafters, while elective surgeries are cancelled in their tens of thousands for sick and ill patients to compensate for the slashing of bed capacity over decades.

Further beachheads are being created for private sector involvement in the NHS, with the announcement that a deal has been made with private firms for an extra 8,000 beds in England and 1,200 ventilators and 20,000 qualified staff.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact