

UK health care assistant: “There’s a fear that if we are tested for COVID-19, most of us will come back positive and the NHS will collapse”

Our reporter
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A senior health care assistant on a gerontology ward in north west England spoke this week to the *World Socialist Web Site* about his experiences at work during the coronavirus pandemic. He raised some of his serious concerns about the safety of both patients and staff as they attempt to deal with the crisis.

“The main thing is lack of clarity going forward, a ‘play it by ear,’ ‘one day at a time’ approach. Management call in daily but seem bewildered and cannot answer the concerns of staff. No one is happy.

“Most of us are calling to be tested, but you only get tested once you have been hospitalised. That is coming from the government. Before that, if you show symptoms, you self-isolate for seven days or family members for 14. We are all concerned that we are spreading the virus from patient to patient. Plus, you might have it but be asymptomatic.

“I think there’s a fear that if we are tested, most of us will come back positive and the NHS will collapse. Why else are they not testing? Unless the primary reason is cost. Either way it’s cynical and dangerous.

“My ward is specifically for elderly care, dementia and Parkinson’s disease. Someone on the ward suspected of having COVID-19 was tested. The results took days to come back and were positive. The person had been in a bay with other patients.

“We’d been wearing minimal PPE [Personal Protective Equipment]. We do have PPE where we work, but it’s standard—nothing like you see on TV with people in China and Italy treating COVID-19—basic masks, gloves, visors and aprons. It doesn’t feel adequate.

“We’re told to change our uniforms when entering and leaving the hospital, but no facilities are provided

for this. There’s a lot of tokenism going on, but management have no solid strategy.

“A patient came over from a main hospital last week. She’d been receiving chemotherapy, and they had moved her for her own safety because of a COVID-19 outbreak there. She was on our ward for 24 hours and moved back—I’m not sure why or what was going on.

“We found out later that she was confirmed to have COVID-19. Maybe two days later, two patients in the bay on the ward where she had been started spiking temperatures of around 39.9 C—a temperature above 37.5 is classed as fever. They were tested. The thing is, though, the tests take days to come back. In the meantime, the patients were classed as possible COVID-19.

“The tests did come back positive on Monday. We swabbed two other ladies in the bay. I asked a colleague via text if the test results were back, and she said no. The testing is taking too long. Whether that’s because of a backlog, I don’t know.

“All visiting only stopped on March 23. Before that, it was for one hour between 6 and 7 p.m. and one visitor per patient, but that was only implemented a few days previous. In the preceding weeks, it was normal visiting!

“There’s a sort of creeping panic on our ward. Everyone tries to stay calm, but there’s an underlying stress.”



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