

# A letter from a concerned UK nurse to the WSWS

15 April 2020

Dear WSWS,

I am a registered nurse and I am grateful for your drive to try and save lives during this COVID-19 pandemic. I have a shared drive to save lives and to also speak out for the vulnerable and for those who feel invisible and silenced by their employers. I recently raised some of my concerns via email to [TV show] “Good Morning Britain” and electronically for the attention of Sadiq Khan (London Mayor). I am unaware if my concerns at that time have been viewed. I hope that you will take a little time to read and consider what I have shared in this email.

I believe that there are several issues that are making the fight and management of the coronavirus more difficult. This includes the well-reported issues that countless medical staff, health care staff and a vast range of employees in varied public services are being put at risk, due to no or inappropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

Further to this, it is worth noting that even those within health care services that have since received some PPE have reported that they have been supplied with masks that are inadequate, unsafe and are not fit for purpose. To add insult to injury, I was stunned to learn that a doctor in a Midlands hospital and a GP has exposed to the media that new expiry dates had been added. However, the masks had expired years before and disgracefully attempts were made to silence NHS staff. This makes me question how many employees from varied other health and social care services have been supplied with the expired dated masks and are actively using them whilst working directly with patients and clients that have tested positive for the coronavirus.

The PPE issue is of great concern and I have no doubt that if testing for the virus becomes widely available that this will lead to the scale of the virus amongst staff in health, social care and varied public services becoming more evident and maybe even more so “if” reliable antibody tests are carried out to reveal just how many health, social care and public service staff have had the virus and possibly infected others, as a result of not being protected themselves.

Whilst I feel that there have been mistakes made by the UK government, particularly at the early stages of this pandemic and the blunder regarding face masks, the reality is that trust is built on honesty which includes the good, the bad and the ugly. There seems to be some reflection on a government level that in the early stages they got it very wrong. This has led to subsequent attempts to try to minimise the damage through stricter measures. This is by no means suggesting that the consequence of prior inaction is

acceptable, and it is not an attempt to diminish the horrors that have occurred during this pandemic. My point is that reflection is essential, regardless of how uncomfortable it is, as people are dying and employers are not exempt from being accountable for their actions. It is their responsibility to reflect and review the consequences of their own mistakes and inactions and to introduce appropriate measures or take actions to protect and safeguard their employees. Sadly, it is too little, too late for some people as they have tragically lost their lives.

My heart ached when I read the article titled “14 London transport workers die: Unite union and Labour mayor insist ‘PPE is not required.’” Amongst the feeling of sadness, I found it heart-warming to learn that Anne Nyack, the mother of bus driver Meks Nyack Ihenacho, remains to be a voice for her son, who sadly passed away from the coronavirus. Furthermore, that Meks Nyack Ihenacho’s mother and family are continuing to advocate and have a voice for other workers that are being put at risk, and that is truly amazing to do that at such a sad time. In the same article that Anne Nyack spoke about her son, I viewed the Management Warning Letter that was sent to workers, threatening that if they place signs on doors or tape off seats nearest the bus driver cabs to prevent passengers using them, that it would result in formal action being taken against them. It is an absolute disgrace how they have been treated by both the employer and how they have been failed by a well-known and respected union. I doubt if that former respect and trust is recoverable, due to the tragedies that have occurred.

It is alarming that employees had to try to consider ways to minimise risks in an attempt to safeguard themselves, their families and others. The reality is the drivers and those within the industry are afraid and they fear for their lives and for their loved ones, as so many people do. I am quite sure that exposed employers will frantically try and find any angle to justify reckless actions. The reality is we should all be protected at work. The Health and Safety at Work Act is very detailed—to draw on just a small section, it clearly summarises that provision and maintenance of a working environment is the responsibility of employers and as reasonably practicable they are required to ensure safe and adequate facilities and arrangements for employees’ welfare at work.

Current information from the World Health Organisation (WHO) is that the virus can cause serious illness and about 1 in every 5 people who catch it need hospital care, and sadly as we all know it has cost lives. They advise that anyone, of any age can get infected but what has been learnt so far is that older people and people with

pre-existing medical conditions (such as high blood pressure, heart disease, lung disease, cancer or diabetes) appear to develop more serious illness than others. It is so important to be aware of the risks to those currently in the shielding category. Please be careful out there, practice social distancing and be aware of means of spread and of the importance of infection control to help protect each other. No matter where we are, we all need to play a part in keeping ourselves and each other safe and it is important to not lose sight of that, as we all rely heavily on each other to protect one another. WHO is assessing ongoing research about COVID-19 and will continue to share updated findings on their website.

As we are all aware, the advice is “Stay Home, Protect the NHS and Save Lives.” Included in the government guidance is “only travel to work if you cannot work from home,” that indirectly gives endless employers a free pass to manipulate for their own gain. A lot of the UK’s workforce has continued to work and have been forced into workplaces for roles not essential or overly essential. This has in turn led to crowding on public transport such as buses, trains, trams, etc. Drivers and key workers using public transport have been pushed into an awful situation that has also made it very difficult to adhere to the social distancing. The reality is even with social distancing that does not mean that you cannot get infected with the virus.

Clearly the categories defined by government are still too broad, and they continue to be open to manipulation by imaginative employers. I urge employees not to be silenced by ruthless and reckless employers and to stand together and speak out, as you or a member of your family’s life may depend on it and you have a legal right to be protected. In addition to this, the impact of being silenced can be damaging to mental health. Essential key workers should be protected, and non-essential staff should be at home.

Even those working from home should be supported by their employers, as a pandemic does not equate to normal times, it is not business as usual and it is distressing for all and that needs to be considered. The business as usual attitude by this and many other employers is irrational, and it is reckless during a pandemic. Like many employers, they can talk the talk, but employees also talk to their friends and loved ones and share what is really going on behind closed doors and what their roles really entail.

I know it is difficult to speak up, but please do not allow reckless and deceitful employers to have that control. We are living in unprecedented times, and the true measure of so many employers will come to light during and after this pandemic. Employees owe no loyalty to a reckless employer. It seems that for some, the order of importance is business as usual and the priority is “make money, make money, make money and protect own interests,” but people’s lives are not replaceable and no amount of money in the world can replace a precious life that is lost.

An additional consequence of employers finding loopholes under the categories of an essential key worker is that children of employees are having to be cared for by their grandparents. Some grandparents are having to cover child care due to an overlap in key workers’ shift patterns. So, despite key workers having access to schools, that does not cover varied shift patterns. For myself and many other grandparents this would not normally be an issue. However, a pandemic is not a normal circumstance, and some of

us grandparents have underlying health issues and are being put at risk as a consequence of employers tweaking the meaning of being a “key worker” to their own advantage. In my opinion, these employers should be prosecuted. As it stands, members of the public can be detained for putting others at risk, but employers should not be exempt from this, as many are doing this on a much larger scale.

Far too many employees are being silenced and are afraid to have a voice for fear of repercussions or losing their jobs. A lot of these employees will continue to work in confined, busy, crowded or unsafe places including buses, and many will continue to use public transport to get to work. This will result in more people becoming infected and spreading the virus, and that will lead to further loss of life. It is clear that further government guidance is still needed, particularly in regard to what essential roles are within key worker categories and how businesses are to run safely. The health and safety of staff need to be at the heart of this. In addition, there should be a formal process to enable employees to report employers for falsely categorising their workers as essential.

It is evident that too many employers cannot be trusted to make the right judgement, and I have no doubt that many employers will continue to tweak what is meant by a “key worker” for their own gain, regardless of the risks. This awful and tragic pandemic will come to an end, and the reality is no end of employers will be held legally accountable for their poor actions. It will not be forgotten, and many employees and families of loved ones that have been negatively affected by the actions of their employers will rightfully seek legal justice. The reality is there has been no end of breaches in the Health and Safety and Work Act and so many workers have been failed by their employers, and by law they are accountable for their actions.

I cannot stand back and say or do nothing. Should you wish to use what I have shared in your campaign to save lives, you are welcome to. I hope that speaking out for the vulnerable and for those who feel invisible and silenced will help.

kindest regards from a concerned nurse



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