

Royal Bournemouth Hospital management and Royal College of Nursing attack frontline nurse for exposing PPE shortages

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Last week the *Bournemouth Daily Echo* replied to “A letter from a frontline nurse in the UK’s Royal Bournemouth Hospital” published by the *World Socialist Web Site* on April 14.

The *Echo*’s article was titled, “Royal Bournemouth Hospital claim they have ‘stocks of PPE.’” It featured statements from Royal Bournemouth and Christchurch Hospitals Trust (RBCH) management and the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) denying the nurse’s allegations.

Hospital management and the RCN told the *Echo* there is no shortage of PPE and that existing guidelines on PPE are fit for purpose.

The WSWs has received a reply to the *Bournemouth Echo*’s claims from the author of the original letter, along with comments from other health care workers at the hospital.

The frontline nurse wrote that, “Staff at my hospital were angry when they saw the *Bournemouth Echo*’s article. Hospital management and the Royal College of Nursing both questioned the authenticity of my letter and denied my allegations. I have been a frontline nurse at the hospital for several years and all the allegations I made about PPE shortages are true.

“At work, the response to my letter was hugely positive. Colleagues—nurses, doctors, porters and cleaners—shared my letter on Facebook and WhatsApp groups at work and left countless messages of solidarity.

“My letter spoke about the dangers we are facing, day in day out, as frontline workers during the coronavirus pandemic. I wanted to give a voice to my colleagues who are dealing with a lack of PPE and with Public Health England (PHE) guidelines that are placing our lives at risk.

“Current guidance from PHE is that full PPE for nurses and doctors is only necessary if you are treating COVID-19 patients in ICU and patients having Aerosol Generating Procedures (AGP). They state that full PPE isn’t necessary when we’re treating COVID-19 patients elsewhere in the hospital. As I wrote, these instructions from the UK government are in breach of World Health Organisation (WHO) guidelines.

“I was well-aware when I wrote the letter that the South West is the least affected area in the UK regarding the pandemic. If we cannot properly manage the outbreak here, how are hospitals coping elsewhere? We are thinking of other health workers in the worst affected areas like London. How are they managing?

“The problems and severe dangers we are facing in contracting COVID-19 at work remains acute and are worsening by the day as adequate protection is not provided. We read with disgust management’s claims that everything is fine in RBCH. They told the *Bournemouth Echo*, ‘We have stocks of the PPE needed to protect our staff as the number of patients with COVID-19 is forecast to increase.’

“We looked at the Trust intranet page and found out we had stock for one week, even though PPE is rationed in many areas. One nurse said to me, ‘This is a load of rubbish.’ A colleague in a clinic at the hospital’s Green Zone said they get only one surgical mask to wear all day.

“I spoke to colleagues in different wards and units in the Red Zone and confirmed the situation in every ward is dire. Colleagues are contracting the virus at an alarming rate. Since my letter was published on April 14, more colleagues have been admitted to Intensive Care Unit (ICU).

“Regardless of the claims made by the management that ‘the safety and wellbeing of our staff and patients is our number one priority,’ frontline workers are still compelled to wear a flimsy apron, simple surgical mask, gloves and visor or goggles in non-acute areas when delivering care to suspected and confirmed COVID-19 patients.

“This means we are not protected while treating patients with the illness who are coughing and sneezing and are on nebulizers or oxygen therapy via nasal cannulas. We are also involved in washing, dressing, feeding and performing ECGs on these patients. We know that we are working without adequate protection.

“Most disgusting of all is the actions of my union, the Royal College of Nursing (RCN). They came to the rescue of the management saying, ‘We are not aware currently of any shortages of equipment in Bournemouth and we are led to understand that they are following national guidelines on its use.’

“The claims by the RCN are a pack of lies and these lies have consequences. On April 13, Dr Peter Tun from Reading died from exposure to COVID-19 after his warnings to Royal Berkshire Hospital about inadequate PPE were ignored. After the death of a much-loved mental health nurse in Leeds, nurses there are refusing shifts unless they are provided with proper protection. Everywhere doctors and nurses are protesting the lack of PPE.

“None of the RCN’s reps have visited us at the hospital or asked

about our safety. No branch meetings have been called to discuss the life and death issues facing nurses. Instead they offer their callous support to the management and the government.

“The PHE guidelines are useless and two doctors are launching legal action because PHE advice goes against World Health Organisation advice. More than 100 NHS and social care workers have died because the guidelines have left them exposed. The concerns I raised in my letter are widely shared.

“Finally, management claimed they had ‘started staff testing which will be vital to help us manage staffing levels.’ But when I wrote two weeks ago, colleagues were struggling to have tests done. A drive through test centre only opened last Friday—after my letter was published—in the multi-story car park. But there is no information yet on how many have been tested, or how many staff have so far been diagnosed.

“As I pointed out in my letter, the gutting and privatisation of the NHS over many years has resulted in a health care emergency. Boris Johnson is boasting the NHS has coped well with the pandemic. But only because thousands of people with COVID-19 symptoms were advised to stay at home—and many died as a result. Added to this, people with life-threatening conditions, including heart attacks and strokes, have not presented at A&E. According to a report in the *Financial Times*, the real death toll, taking into account excess deaths at home and in care homes, is 41,000. Of these, 134 are NHS and social care workers. This is horrifying.

The response from hospital management and the RCN shows the urgent need for nurses, doctors and healthcare workers to organise independently. The issues at Bournemouth Hospital are faced by workers at hospitals across the UK and around the world. Our fight to save patients’ lives and those of frontline healthcare workers means developing a unified struggle.”

A health care assistant (HCA) in the Red Zone said, “I agree totally with the frontline nurse’s letter not this management’s load of rubbish in the *Daily Echo*. I was told again yesterday that unless the positive or suspected patient is on aerosol generating procedures, the cheap plastic aprons, gloves and surgical masks are adequate.

“I will not attend to any suspected or positive patient without proper PPE. It’s like holding a gun to your head or playing Russian roulette. If the people from Clinical Site tell me off, then I would just say ‘well you go in and treat them without correct PPE then’.”

Another Red Zone HCA said, “It can be true that they have enough PPE as they claim, but I think they should leave the assessment with the staff who are in close contact with Covid positive patients. They should not dictate what we can and cannot use when we are caring for patients who are positive with Covid. It’s really scary as is proven with the number of cases affecting our staff already.

“All the people who are supposed to take care of us are licking the bosses’ asses. Unions are useless when it comes to these issues.”

A senior nurse in the Acute Medical Unit said, “There could be enough PPE in store cupboards and elsewhere but it’s confusing for us when we are told to wear one thing—gloves, apron and mask—and then we see A&E staff come up to our ward wearing

full gowns, FFP3 masks and goggles and a visor and full-length gloves. We would also prefer to feel safe by the PPE.”

A bank (staff resource pool) nurse commented, “During the First World War lots of soldiers died in Russia because they wore uniforms which were insufficient to bear and deal with the cold Russian winter. I, as an NHS worker, feel like that soldier who died in the cold, Russian winter. Why? Because the only PPE they allow me to wear are the fluid repellent surgical mask, plastic apron, and gloves. And I know that it is not sufficient to prevent contracting the virus and I can also infect my family as well.

“A few days ago, while I was looking after a patient with suspected COVID, another colleague, a few steps from me, was looking after a patient with suspected CPO [Carbapenemase Producing Organisms] infection. She wore a surgical mask like me, gloves like me, but a long sleeves gown unlike my simple plastic apron. COVID is highly contagious and deadly, but CPO is not that contagious. This sums up the stupidity of the policies.

“I will continue to do my job at the best of my possibilities and will continue to do it even when the pandemic is over but, please give us this possibility. We do not need claps, we need respect. People who lost their lives need respect. People who are fighting with this invisible enemy need respect. Please, give us more FFP3 and gowns to wear even when we work in the red wards.”

A Health Care Assistant in a Red Ward said, “We still do not have enough protection. A very young [COVID-19] patient was coughing heavily. I thought it would be safer to wear a gown, respirator (FFP3) mask. We did not have respirators. So I asked the staff nurse who was in charge during that shift whether we could at least wear gowns which were available. She did not have any problem with us wearing them, but she was very concerned that she would get the blame for letting us use the gowns. So I had to go to that patient without enough protection during my entire 12 and a half hour shift. I simply couldn’t refuse to go there because I have got children the same age.”



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