Letter from a Bournemouth Hospital frontline nurse sparks broader discussion on conditions facing NHS workers in UK

Our reporter
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On November 20, the *World Socialist Web Site* published a letter written by a frontline nurse at the UK's Royal Bournemouth Hospital (RBH). It was circulated widely on social media, creating a broader discussion about the dangerous working conditions facing health and social care workers during the second wave of the pandemic.

The letter was publicised by NHS FightBack, an initiative of the Socialist Equality Party, and then shared by a number of National Health Service (NHS) Facebook campaign groups. Those posts reached tens of thousands of people with several hundred liking the NHS FightBack Facebook page in response.

Hospitals across the country are in a perilous situation due to staff burnout, shortages of staff and a surge of COVID-19 patients. Hundreds of health workers have fallen victim to the virus because of a lack of adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) and government guidelines in breach of World Health Organization recommendations. Thousands more are experiencing COVID-19 symptoms and some of the recovered are experiencing the debilitating effects of "Long Covid".

At RBH, the letter was circulated and read widely among staff. A health care assistant commented that "it was a true picture of what is happening on the ground and totally accurate. That is why colleagues share it."

An RBH nurse, who agreed with the letter of their co-worker, told the WSWS that they had found there was no adequate PPE available for a night shift in a ward in the West wing of the hospital. This was despite there being 20 patients with COVID in that ward. The nurse had to find some PPE from another ward and was forced to use one visor during the whole of a 12-and-a-half-hour shift—cleaning it after every patient contact. The nurse said, "It's no surprise that so many colleagues are off sick with COVID."

The frontline nurse's letter was posted by one of its readers in Reddit CoronavirusUK, a page with more than 75,000 members. Dozens of tweets linking to the article were circulated online with some being forwarded, to shame them, to Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Health Secretary Matt Hancock. Some were tweeted to the local *Daily Echo* newspaper as well as journalists in media including at the BBC and ITV. Others forwarded it to hospital management asking what they were going to do about it.

Benzie@Elmlet tweeted to Hancock and Johnson, "SHOCKING BUT NOT SURPRISED. SHAME ON YOU ALL".

Victoria Bone directed her tweet against Johnson, Hancock and the health sector unions Unison and the Royal College of Nursing, "This article should NEVER have had to have been written. Staff and PPE are needed. Didn't you learn in the 1st lockdown?"

Sarah Faye tweeted the letter with the caption, "On the front line of nursing the Death Secretary [Hancock] still doesn't care about the pain and anguish the NHS goes through. Solidarity with you all, and where are you trade unions? It's time to step up to the plate for our NHS family!"

Tingletoot68 tweeted to Hancock, "This can be heard from nurses and doctors across the country, they deserve better and so do the public. False sickly smiles clap and a piece of tat to pin to uniforms do not cut it."

RBH is situated on the UK's southern coast. The prevalence of the disease in the area is relatively low compared to cities in the North and Midlands. Nevertheless, RBH and Poole Hospital Trust (PHT) jointly had 107 patients with COVID, six of them in intensive care, this Monday, according to a PHT consultant. In addition, 130 health workers have COVID-19 symptoms and 150 are self-isolating, both record numbers. A further 70 workers are shielding. During the spring height of the pandemic, there were fewer than 50 patients with COVID-19 between both hospitals.

The Bournemouth nurse said in the letter, "We are not even in the worst hit areas of COVID-19 outbreaks but the perilous situation we encounter here compels me to think about how our health and social care colleagues in areas with a massive surge of COVID-19 cases cope."

Nationally, more than 15,000 patients with COVID-19 are in hospital. Some hospitals are close to capacity.

Despite the situation facing local hospitals and hazardous working conditions among hospital staff, Tory MPs in the area

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spoke out against even limited new restrictions coming into place when the recent one-month national lockdown ended.

Criticising the government's move to place Dorset under Tier 2 restrictions, Conservative MP for Poole, Sir Robert Syms, told the *Daily Echo*, "There are five criteria the health secretary talked about and hospitals aren't under particularly great pressure at the moment, they don't have that many in ICU, so I can't see any reason why we are in this particular tier." With sheer disregard for public safety, another Tory MP, Tobias Ellwood, suggested in a BBC interview that patients could be sent to Nightingale field hospitals if things get bad as a result of placing Dorset on a lower tier. Some twitter users sent the RBH nurse's letter to Syms.

In the NHS FightBack Facebook group, posts citing the nurse's letter reached nearly 14,000 people, including many NHS workers, and had more than 4,500 engagements.

Gary commented, "This is absolutely disgraceful. This government have a hell of a lot to answer for. I'm moderate risk to COVID as I'm asthmatic and don't want to go near a hospital. The NHS doesn't want me putting extra pressure on its overstretched exhausted mentally affected staff who are reliving what their seeing and lack of staffing too! I'm trying to protect you all!"

In another Facebook group, NHS Workers Say NO to Public Sector pay inequality, the letter reached more than 19,000. Health care professionals and members of the general public took part in the discussion.

Christine wrote, "This is a really tough read. As a retired nurse and health visitor I really feel for the staff, their exhaustion, exasperation not being able to give the standard of care. And all the media talk about is Christmas!"

Rowena added, "It's the same where I work... and there are still people out there not taking it seriously. The general public don't see the pressures on hospitals or the need for patient flow (in/out) to make room for the sick patient. Drives me bonkers... we are all so tired, stressed and getting to a point where we are burned out by the pressure."

Another group member, Vanessa, joined the discussion to say, "This is awful and I'm fearing just the tip of the iceberg this winter. I think covid may be the end of the NHS."

Maureen agreed, "This sounds absolutely horrendous and defiantly unsafe. As a retired NHS nurse you have my sympathies and well done for speaking out. I hope someone is listening."

Elizabeth, an emergency nurse practitioner wrote, "This was hard reading and very well written. I work in a different trust but what has been said here is being echoed throughout the country.

"Can't comment on how I feel about the government. Forget the arguments about pay raises, I just don't want to hear about another colleagues death. People in power have a lot to answer for… and they will get away with it. I've had enough."

Suzanne commented that the nurse's letter was an "Extremely well written and worrying article that mirrors where I'm working." Another health worker, Jackie, replied, "yes same where I work."

Rebecca wrote, "there is always good being done everywhere within the NHS and this is often widely celebrated and reported on quite rightly. This particular piece, however, is highlighting the desperation of an increasingly fragile workforce and needs to be heard as a priority.

"We need to separate the good and bad just now in order to raise the profile of how close we are to collapse of a previously robust and well-coordinated organisation.

"We are not even a fraction of the way in to the busiest period for the Health Service and this letter suggests a crisis, never experienced previously, is only weeks away.

"We can celebrate each and every success story still, but the devastation caused by Covid met by a poorly led and corrupt government needs to be headline news just now as it is all being swept under the carpet whilst the fat cats are sat back preparing to spend their ill gotten gains on luxury Christmases without a care in the world and without a second thought to those who are essentially slaves to an overwhelmed and crumbling NHS."

The health trade unions have played a criminal role in allowing the government to impose its herd immunity policy that has seen the death of tens of thousands of people, including hundreds of NHS workers.

Commenting on the NHS FightBack post exposing conditions in Bournemouth, BJ Waltho, a leading member of the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) and head of delivery in RBH, tried to contain the political fallout. She advised health workers to report grievances to the impotent unions, including the RCN, and to hospital management. Waltho wrote, "I really do hope this nurse has raised her concerns to her Union reps or her/his Speak Up Guardian [part of an internal complaints procedure]."

The WSWS urges all National Health Service workers to contact us with their experiences. Health workers should join the NHS FightBack group and assist in building rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the trade unions.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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