

COVID-positive health care workers in Washington state told to work while symptomatic

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18 January 2022

Health care workers at MultiCare Health Systems in Washington state have been ordered by the hospital, clinic and urgent care network to resume working even if they are symptomatic. The Jason Rantz Show on radio station KTTH broke the story, publishing an internal memo from MultiCare dated January 6.

Claiming “crisis levels of staffing,” the memo asserts that the hospital system has changed its “employee testing and return-to-work process to allow people to return to work more quickly than before.” The memo continues, “some staff may return to work even if they are experiencing mild symptoms,” adding the caveat that employees are to return only if symptoms “are improving.”

Health care workers took to social media to express their outrage after the new policy was exposed. One nurse commented: “I’m an ICU RN. I’ve known about this for about two weeks now as my employer has already showered us with emails about these new ‘crisis-guidelines.’ This is the essence of ‘Insult to Injury.’ As if we haven’t gone through enough trauma in these past two years, now they will ‘allow’ us to also face the moral dilemma of coming to work at the cost of potentially (very likely seems to be a better choice of word) infecting our vulnerable patients and our colleagues. This is too much!!! It’s inhumane! Not even soldiers at war are ever asked to harm their brothers and sisters at arms!”

Another added, “THIS IS CRAZY! Our health care system has become so overrun that now the nurses can’t even stay home until they have a negative test, (and stop shedding the virus.....passing it around to patients!)”

The immediate cause for the demand by MultiCare to

its workers to return to work even while infectious stems from the skyrocketing hospitalizations in Washington state. The most recent figures reveal a daily average of about 2,200 hospitalizations statewide, well above the state’s previous record of 1,700. Washington State Hospital Association Executive Vice President Taya Briley told reporters last week, “This is the worst situation hospitals in Washington state have been in compared to any prior point during the pandemic.”

The record hospitalizations being seen in Washington and other states are another nail in the coffin of the conception promoted by the media and political establishment that the Omicron variant is “mild.” Since it became the dominant coronavirus variant in December, the surge of cases is creating a severe health care crisis. The spread of Omicron has led to increased staff shortages and crushing caseloads at hospitals nationwide. The response by MultiCare is one of many desperate and criminal measures taken by private health care organizations to maintain staffing levels, regardless of the dangers of allowing infected nurses and other health care workers to continue working if they have mild to no symptoms.

The timing of the MultiCare memo is also significant. It was issued the same day that the Department of Health and Human Services issued new guidelines stating that hospitals no longer have to report the “[p]revious day’s COVID-19 deaths” to the federal government. That same day, Ezekiel Emanuel, a former Biden administration COVID-19 adviser, wrote in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) that governments should “retire” COVID-19 death reporting.

In other words, hospitals, as well as state health officials, are following the line set by the Biden administration, that Omicron is to be allowed to rip through society, no matter the mass deaths that will follow. Meanwhile, the government will seek to cover its tracks for this homicidal policy by obscuring the real death toll.

The impact of these policies has been felt in Washington state. Daily cases have spiked to nearly 16,000, and daily deaths have tripled from a low in early January to 31 a day now, with more than 10,000 total officially recorded deaths in the state since the beginning of the pandemic. Last week, Democratic Governor Jay Inslee reported that emergency rooms are full and called up 100 National Guard troops in order to help the hospitals deal with the unprecedented crisis.

Dr. Michael Anderson, chief medical officer for Virginia Mason Franciscan Health, told the *Tacoma News Tribune*, “Our emergency departments are absolutely full and their treatment bays and therefore a lot of our care is being provided in the waiting areas and in additional tents that are spread across the system,” he said. “We probably currently have just over 100 patients in temporary bed locations across our eight hospitals right now, waiting for an inpatient stay.”

In King County, the largest county in the state, COVID-19 hospitalizations are higher than they have been at any other point in the pandemic, according to Dr. John Lynch, medical director of Harborview Medical Center’s infection control program.

Such high hospitalization rates will inevitably be followed by more deaths. With the increased transmissibility of the Omicron variant, the coming months will lead to vulnerable patients getting infected by sick health care workers, the delay of needed procedures due to hospital shortages, and health care workers being threatened with legal action if they do not return to work despite infection status.

The only way forward for health care workers in their fight against being forced to work while infected is to turn to their fellow workers across Washington state and nationally. No confidence can be placed either in the Democratic Party or the unions, including the Washington State Nurses Association, which has limited its response to pleading with “the state to ensure workers cannot be forced to return while sick.” This is the same Inslee administration that has helped

enforce the mass infection policy in the first place.

The fight to protect the health of caregivers as well as patients is a life-or-death issue. Nurses and other medical workers must turn to the formation of rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the pro-management unions, as part of a broader struggle to end the pandemic through the scientific policy of elimination and eradication. This involves a political struggle against a capitalist system that prioritizes the stock market and profits over human lives.



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