



Rt Hon Matt Hancock  
Secretary of State for Health & Social Care  
Department of Health & Social Care  
39, Victoria Street  
London  
SW1H 0EU

Saturday 18 April, 2020

Sent via Email

Dear Mr Hancock,

### **UK Provision of PPE, Testing and pharmaceutical ingredients/products**

GMB is UK's third largest trade union with hundreds of thousands of members in Health & Social Care, who bravely and selflessly put themselves on the frontline of tackling the COVID-19 virus on a daily basis.

Our members are consistently raising concerns with us about lack of adequate supply and quality of PPE, and the alarmingly poor progress being made with testing of health and social care workers across the country. Despite Government reassurances that progress is being made in these areas, we are not seeing this universally on the ground.

GMB members' concerns are further heightened because of the revised guidance issued yesterday by Public Health England which on the face of it appears to be guidance drawn up based on availability of supplies and not on evidence or best practice. GMB fears guidance re-drafted in haste could have severe consequences on the lives of front-line workers fighting this pandemic.

Despite making repeated representation to several Government departments GMB is now formally writing to you as we want to see the Government getting control of these crucial issues, which are literally the difference between life or death for our members and people in their care. GMB is keen to get some clarity on the current situation in relation to Government action to ensure sufficient supplies of quality PPE and testing kits, and a structure of laboratory testing capacity that can sustainably deal with the high level of testing we urgently need to see in the UK.

To this end, we raise our questions in two categories 1) Specific to the recent revised PHE guidance (17/04/20) & 2) Wider concerns on supplies and testing. GMB will be grateful for detailed answers at your earliest convenience.

## **Category 1 - Questions in relation to the updated PHE guidance issued 17/04/20**

1. How was the decision made to change the Public Health England guidance and to “compromise” on the Health & Safety Executive’s guidance made - and which factors - clinical and scientific - were taken into account?
2. When was the HSE’s “rapid evidence review” into personal protective equipment commissioned by the Government’s Chief Scientific Adviser and on what basis?
3. Who made the decision to downgrade the Public Health England guidance in apparent contradiction of WHO coronavirus guidance on support treatment, NHS Scotland guidance and the 2019 Cochrane Systematic Review recommendations?
4. Why, given the HSE’s “rapid evidence review” indicates that non-sleeve aprons expose the arms and torso to exposure, have aprons now been indicated for use in cases even when there is risk of “splashes or sprays” and without due regard to work settings such as ambulances where wash and change facilities are unavailable?
5. What further assessment has been made of the availability of other essential personal protective equipment (PPE) such as eyewear and gloves including and how will the Government proceed to publish rolling updates on the local and regional supplies of PPE referenced in the Public Health England guidance?

## **Category 2 - Questions on Supply and Testing**

### **Joint COVID related procurement**

The EU Commission has made four Covid related joint procurements so far: PPE (Gloves, masks, gowns, shields); ventilators and breathing equipment; testing kits; laboratory equipment. Given pressure on UK testing:

- can the Government confirm whether they are joining the joint EU testing kit and Laboratory equipment procurement?
- The EU is planning further joint procurement on treatments/painkillers etc. and vaccine development - can the UK Government confirm its intentions in relation to joining this procurement?

### **PPE**

The EU Commission has established a clearing-house to look at stocks of PPE, and production capacity in Member states and outside, as well as how to convert/adapt manufacturing production lines towards PPE supply.

- Is the UK Government involved in this joint initiative to maximize the scope to get quality PPE to our frontline workers in health and social care and other key workers quickly and sustainably?
- If not, what is the Government strategy and marketplace for securing these vitally needed supplies?

## **Gloves**

We understand that production of gloves is more difficult to convert production quickly and effectively than some other items of PPE;

- What measures are the Government taking to ensure sufficient supplies of protective gloves and ensure wider production of longer gloves necessary for acute environments?
- We note that many testing centres have healthcare staff only wearing wrist gloves stretching into cars and being subject to coughing on exposed skin.

## **Testing and Laboratory capacity**

- How many test kit supplies does the UK Government and health/social care system currently have? Where is Government looking to procure effective test kits?
- What is our current Laboratory capacity to process these tests in time for them to be valid?
- Is UK taking up the opportunity to be involved in sharing of samples and co-operating on Lab and testing capacity and quality of re-agents with other EU member states, which is being encouraged across the EU?

## **Shortages of Pharmaceutical ingredients**

-85% of pharmaceutical ingredients are produced in Asia, predominantly China and India. Chinese production has been massively disrupted and India has an export ban in place. GMB has major concerns that provision of sufficient supplies of COVID related treatments will be the next supply crisis.

- Is the Government involved in the European Medicines Agency initiative to list critical products for COVID related treatments and making efforts to encourage companies to work together to produce necessary medicines, given that EU Competition laws have been relaxed to allow this?
- If not, what is the Government doing to ensure sustainable supplies of key medicines to deal with the pandemic?

## **Research in to Vaccine development**

The EU Commission is funding 18 research projects to a value of 48.5€million in epidemiology, public health, diagnostic tests and treatment, several now focusing on the COVID virus. We understand that a German vaccine will begin trials in June 2020.

- Can the Government confirm whether the UK is participating, or at least co-operating in these developmental projects.
- If not, can you advise what level of research and funding is being invested in the UK in this area?



Given the concern of our members and the public interest, I will be publishing and circulating copies of this letter in the public domain.

We look forward to receiving your response.

Yours sincerely,

**Rehana Azam**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Azam'.

**National Secretary for Public Services, GMB**