

January 30, 2020

Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General
World Health Organization
Avenue Appia 20
1211 Geneva
SWITZERLAND

Dear Dr. Tedros:

The novel coronavirus, 2019-nCoV, which has spread rapidly since it was first identified a few weeks ago, poses a threat to public health around the world. Healthcare facilities at the epicenter of the outbreak are already overwhelmed. As more and more suspected cases are identified every day, the potential for a surge in patients seeking care in communities around the world is very real. Without sufficient preparation this could overwhelm more healthcare facilities, putting patients, their families, and nurses and other healthcare staff at even greater risk.

The World Health Organization (WHO) provides important resources that can guide healthcare employers' preparedness to respond to potential cases of 2019-nCoV. However, WHO's interim guidance on "Infection prevention and control during health care when novel coronavirus (nCoV) infection is suspected" ("interim guidance on infection prevention and control") falls short in ways that endanger the health and safety of the nurses and other healthcare workers that patients and their families rely on for life-saving care.¹ WHO should strengthen its interim guidance on infection prevention and control in the following ways:

- 1. WHO should call for airborne precautions to be implemented when healthcare workers are caring for patients with possible or known 2019-nCoV infections.**

In the current situation where little is known about the transmission of 2019-nCoV, the WHO's recommendation that only droplet and contact precautions be used for patients with possible 2019-nCoV infections is irresponsible and may endanger healthcare workers. The WHO interim guidance neglects the precautionary principle, which states that we should not wait until we know for certain that something is harmful before we take action to protect

¹ World Health Organization. "Infection prevention and control during health care when novel coronavirus (nCoV) infection is suspected." Available at [https://www.who.int/publications-detail/infection-prevention-and-control-during-health-care-when-novel-coronavirus-\(ncov\)-infection-is-suspected](https://www.who.int/publications-detail/infection-prevention-and-control-during-health-care-when-novel-coronavirus-(ncov)-infection-is-suspected) (Accessed Jan 24, 2020).

people's health. This is a new virus whose transmission pathway is unknown. Furthermore, at least fourteen healthcare workers have been infected with 2019-nCoV in China. Under the precautionary principle and as recommended by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, WHO should call for airborne precautions to be implemented, in addition to contact and droplet precautions, for all patients with possible or known 2019-nCoV infections.²

2. WHO should explicitly call on healthcare employers to communicate clearly and transparently with nurses and other healthcare staff about 2019-nCoV cases and potential occupational exposure.

Workers have a fundamental right to a safe and healthy workplace. It is unacceptable for an employer to hide information from employees about their possible or known exposure to any hazard including 2019-nCoV.

We, the undersigned affiliated unions of Global Nurses United, which unites nurses' unions in 28 countries around the world, call upon you to strengthen WHO's interim guidance on infection prevention and control to protect the nurses and other healthcare workers who are at the heart of patient care and essential to the response to 2019-nCoV.

If you have questions regarding this letter or would like to arrange a meeting, please contact Kenneth Zinn, coordinator of Global Nurses United, at +1-240-235-2008 or at kzinn@nationalnursesunited.org. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Annie Butler, Federal Secretary
Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation
Australia

Shirley Marshal Díaz Morales, Presidenta
Federação Nacional dos Enfermeiros
Brazil

² U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Interim Healthcare Infection Prevention and Control Recommendations for Patients Under Investigation for 2019 Novel Coronavirus." Available at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/infection-control.html> (Accessed Jan 24, 2020).

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cc: Ms. Elizabeth Iro, Chief Nursing Officer, WHO