

BULLETIN

NUPGE wants respirators for health care workers

September 1, 2009

PHAC should follow the 'precautionary principle' for everyone who comes in direct contact with the pandemic influenza virus and make a 'fit-tested NIOSH approved N95 respirator' available to each employee.

Ottawa (1 Sept. 2009) - The National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE) says all health care workers exposed to a pandemic flu virus like H1N1 should be given fit-tested NIOSH approved N95 respirators to protect them on the job.

The recommendation is made by James Clancy, president of the 340,000-member union, in a letter to the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) dealing with weaknesses in Annex F of the Canadian Pandemic Influenza Plan (CPIP).

More than 100,000 of the union's members across Canada are health care workers, including over 70,000 health sciences professionals who deliver diagnostic, clinical, rehabilitation and preventive services.

"In our view Annex F does not go far enough to protect health care workers in the event of a pandemic influenza outbreak such as the H1N1 virus," Clancy writes.

"More specifically we are concerned that Annex F does not adopt the precautionary principle and does not recommend that, as a minimum standard, all health care workers having direct patient contact with either suspected or confirmed cases of a pandemic influenza virus be provided with a fit-tested NIOSH approved N95 respirator."

Legal, moral and ethical responsibility

Clancy takes issue with the PHAC's position on the danger posed by the H1N1 virus.

"We believe there is ample current available scientific evidence suggesting that an influenza virus like H1N1 is capable of being spread through airborne transmission. However, we understand that PHAC's position is that there is not yet a scientific consensus on this issue," he notes.

"We argue, however, that in light of any scientific uncertainty, and given that any consensus is likely to emerge later rather than sooner, that our governments and health care employers have a legal, moral and ethical responsibility to put safety first and provide all potentially exposed health care workers with the highest quality and safest personal protective equipment that is available."

Clancy said the SARS outbreak in Ontario several years ago demonstrated how important it is for governments and employers to exercise the "precautionary principle" and not to wait for "scientific certainty" in such circumstances. This was one of the key recommendations of the SARS inquiry, conducted by Justice Archie Campbell, he noted.

"We are very disappointed and concerned that PHAC has resisted in applying Justice Campbell's advice. This is most obvious in the sections of Annex F that deal with the provision and use of N95 respirators," Clancy emphasized.

"This is unacceptable to us. We agree with Justice Campbells conclusion that if any risk exists at all then governments and employers must put safety first. We note that most jurisdictions have laws requiring employers to take every reasonable precaution to protect the health and safety of workers and our health care members rightly expect their employers to do so. We also note that the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) currently recommends that all health care workers who enter the room of a patient with suspected or confirmed H1N1 flu should wear an N95 respirator."

[The original letter sent from NUPGE president James Clancy to the Public Health Agency of Canada](#)

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