



July 29, 2020

The Honourable Stephen McNeil, MLA
Premier of Nova Scotia
Halifax, NS

Dear Premier McNeil,

As you know, the COVID-19 pandemic presents particular risks for nurses and other health workers. The World Health Organization has stated that health workers are at increased risk of COVID-19 infection, and data from the US and UK suggests frontline workers are infected at 12 times the rate of the general population. In Canada, recent data suggests that over one in five (21.52%) cases is a health care worker.

On March 11th of this year, the day the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, the Nurses' Union, along with the NSGEU, Unifor and CUPE, called upon your government to ensure that health workers dealing with confirmed or potential patients with COVID-19 exercise airborne precautions, which means they should be provided with N95 respirators, in addition to gowns, gloves and faceshields or goggles. This is in contrast to contact and droplet precautions, where a surgical mask is used instead of a respirator.

On March 12th, in a meeting with the Chief Medical Officer and leading infectious disease specialists in the province, we reiterated this request, emphasizing the importance of the precautionary principle. At the time, we were told that respirator masks should be conserved solely for aerosol generating medical procedures, and that SARS-COV-2 was spread via contact and expelled droplets, rather than via particles aerosolized during breathing, coughing and sneezing. Further, it was suggested that our request, if realized, would recklessly deplete the stock of respirators.

Later in March, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which had been recommending the use of respirators for COVID cases, suggested that contact and droplet precautions could be used where the supply of respirators made this a necessity. Ontario, which had previously required the use of respirators, reversed course and joined other Canadian provinces by lowering to contact and droplet precautions.

In response to these positions, unions in other provinces have successfully negotiated memoranda of understanding with their employers and governments. These memoranda recognize that, while contact and droplet precautions are typically observed with suspected and confirmed COVID-19 patients, a nurse or other health care worker may determine, based on their point of care risk assessment, that airborne precautions are required. This could be the

case, for example, with a patient who is coughing or sneezing excessively, or who produces sputum, or who may be at heightened risk of cardiac arrest (and could therefore soon require CPR). At this time, following a recent pre-arbitration settlement in Manitoba, Nova Scotia and Quebec are the only provinces without such an agreement.

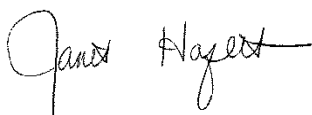
Earlier this month, 239 experts from 32 countries sent an open letter to the WHO outlining the evidence regarding airborne transmission of the SARS-COV-2 virus. The WHO has since revised its previous stance, now admitting that airborne transmission may be possible. Many scientists around the world believe it may be the primary mechanism of transmission, helping to explain the phenomenon of asymptomatic transmission as well as so-called super-spreader events.

Earlier this year, you and Dr. Strang revised your recommendation on public masking in response to the emergence of new evidence. We are asking you to do the same thing with respect to the precautions used with confirmed and suspected COVID-19 patients. We ask that you enter into a memorandum of understanding that ensures access to fit-tested N95 respirators and respects nurses' and other health workers' point of care risk assessment. An example of the agreement reached in Alberta is provided with this letter. Further, we ask that the province increases its stock of N95 respirators, ensure nurses and others are fit-tested for their use, and ensure they have access to them when required.

We are currently in the fortunate position of having few to no cases in the province, due largely to important steps public health has taken to keep Nova Scotians safe. This is the ideal time to ensure our health system is adequately prepared to protect health workers in the event of future outbreaks.

I look forward to your timely reply on this important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Janet Hazelton". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Janet Hazelton, BScN, RN, MPA

President, Nova Scotia Nurses' Union

Cc: Honourable Randy Delorey, MLA, Minister of Health and Wellness;

Dr. Robert Strang, Chief Medical Officer of Health;

Alexandra Smith, Director, Health Sector Labour Relations and Compensation