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ICN COVID-19 Update: Occupational risks to nurses must be minimised to enable them to continue their vital work

Geneva, Switzerland; 20 March 2020 - In this week's International Council of Nurses (ICN) COVID-19 update we share the tragic news that a number of nurses have died from the infection.

ICN President Annette Kennedy has met with World Health Organization Director General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus to discuss the development of the pandemic, and to express again her concerns about the lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

Ms Kennedy said:

“It is with great sorrow that we have heard of the deaths of nurses working with COVID-19 patients.

‘Nursing has always contained an element of selflessness, and it has never been without risk, but it is particularly saddening to hear that nurses have lost their lives in the line of duty at this time of crisis.

‘Despite these deaths, that spirit of service and selflessness continues, and all around the world nurses are carrying on their vital work caring for patients, regardless of the very real personal risks they face.

‘As the global voice of nursing, ICN sends its condolences and best wishes to the families and loved ones of nurses who have made the ultimate sacrifice in their efforts to do their best to help others.”

ICN continues to urge governments and organisations to fulfil their obligations to protect nurses and other healthcare staff. There are still shortages of PPE, and this is unacceptable. Nurses must be protected if they are to stay fit and healthy and continue their essential work in caring for the sick.

ICN Chief Executive Officer Howard Catton in a [video message](#) updating all National Nursing Associations on ICN's work on COVID-19, said ICN would continue calling strongly for support for nurses to be prioritised by governments and other decision-makers.

“ICN has been vocal from the very beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, calling for governments to prioritise the support of nurses and ensure that essential personal protective equipment and psychological support is being provided. Myself and our President personally raised the issue with WHO DG Dr Tedros and we have continued to support WHO in getting the message out to both governments and the public through the media and other channels.

‘Sadly, we are seeing what happens when nurses are not properly protected and bravely continue to work and treat patients. Some of our colleagues have made the

ultimate sacrifice and we know many more may die if we do not raise the alarm even louder and demand action. That is our duty and responsibility as the international voice of nurses.

'I have used media interviews to tell the world about the unique job that nurses are doing, and that they will only be able to carry on if they have the necessary PPE, adequate rest breaks during their shifts, and time to recover between shifts. Nurses have stepped up, and we need manufacturers of PPE to step up production and distribution to an unprecedented level to meet the world-wide demand.

'As countries move towards social distancing, isolation measures and lock-down situations to support the public health control measures advocated by the World Health Organization (WHO), nurses could feel increasingly isolated themselves.

'Their psychological wellbeing is just as important as their physical health, and they will need time to process the stressful work they are doing, and opportunities to debrief from this extremely demanding situation.

'We have been liaising, coordinating and sharing ICN's National Nursing Associations experiences so that we can disseminate best practice to all the world's nurses, to maximise their effectiveness and keep them safe. We will continue to do this important work and to that end we will be holding a webinar next Friday, 27th March with all NNAs to further share their experiences and learn from others."

Dr Tedros has emphasised the importance of testing for the virus, and ICN echoes and supports that advice, while understanding that individual countries will adapt and adopt public health measures in line with their population's specific needs.

Ms Kennedy added:

"In this Year of the Nurse and Midwife the eyes of the world are on our profession in a way that we could not have anticipated. Nurses are in the spotlight, and all around the planet this tragic pandemic is revealing the irreplaceable work of nursing for all to see.

'It was gratifying to see citizens in Spain, Switzerland and other countries standing on their balconies to applaud nurses for the amazing work they do, and I am sure there will be other displays of gratitude over the coming weeks and months.

'People have always trusted nurses, and these spontaneous expressions of love for the profession should be taken to heart by all nurses wherever they are."

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Note to Editors

The **International Council of Nurses (ICN)** is a federation of more than 130 national nurses' associations representing the millions of nurses worldwide. Operated by nurses and leading nursing internationally, ICN works to ensure quality care for all and sound health policies globally.

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