



Novel coronavirus: Australian GPs raise concerns about shortage of face masks

Elisabeth Mahase

The BMJ

General practitioners in Australia have raised concerns over their safety and the safety of their teams because of the lack of protective equipment, including masks, which they said are needed to respond confidently to the novel coronavirus outbreak.

Medical equipment suppliers have posted notices on their websites stating that they are no longer accepting orders of supplies such as masks, and GPs have told *The BMJ* that they are struggling to get hold of the supplies they need. The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) said that the recent bushfires had led to face mask shortages in some areas.

The concerns were raised as the World Health Organization announced that it would be sending 531 000 masks, 350 000 pairs of gloves, 40 000 respirators, and almost 18 000 isolation gowns from its warehouses in Dubai and Accra to 24 countries in need.¹

Harry Nespolon, RACGP president, said, "It is vital that GPs have a combination of P2/N95 masks and surgical masks to deal with coronavirus. We welcomed the government's move to open the nation's emergency medical stockpile to make these masks available to clinics nationwide to help combat the virus. Obviously these masks need to be distributed to all the GPs who need them as soon as possible, but we appreciate that there are logistical challenges in getting them out.

"There were shortages of P2/N95 masks in some areas that were affected by the recent bushfires in Australia as people were using them to deal with the smoke. It's clearly important that

GPs in these areas get the face masks they need to combat coronavirus, and we know that the government is working on getting supplies to these areas and elsewhere, and some have already received them."

Kat McLean, a GP in Queensland, Australia, said, "As GPs we want to help, we are trained and skilled to assist. We are on the front line watching as the situation emerges. To do so though we need to ensure our safety and the safety of our teams. It's incredibly concerning to have significant supply issues around the equipment we need to do this.

"The last thing we want to do is create panic. To my knowledge our hospitals are well resourced. This problem seems unique to primary care, but it needs to be resolved."

As of 5 February, Australia was dealing with 13 cases of the novel coronavirus, including three in Queensland.

McLean said that she had tried multiple suppliers, including EBOS Healthcare and MediOne, but was unable to source the protective supplies she needed. The EBOS website says, "We understand that this is a concern for most of our customers at this time but be assured we are working with our suppliers to understand when we should be receiving these items to support current market needs."

¹ World Health Organization. Twitter 4 Feb 2020 <https://twitter.com/WHO/status/1224734084066312192>

Published by the BMJ Publishing Group Limited. For permission to use (where not already granted under a licence) please go to <http://group.bmj.com/group/rights-licensing/permissions>