



Covid-19: Government cannot say whether NHS will run out of protective gowns this weekend

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NHS staff may not have enough protective gowns this weekend because of a severe shortage in supplies, the health secretary has admitted.

Matt Hancock told MPs on the health select committee on 17 April that recent changes to UK clinical guidance on personal protective equipment (PPE)¹ had increased demand for all such equipment at a time when there was a serious shortage.

When asked by the select committee chair, Jeremy Hunt, whether there would be enough gowns to see NHS staff through this weekend, Hancock said, “The challenge of getting protective equipment out to everybody who needs it is an incredibly difficult one. We are tight on gowns, that is the pressure point at the moment.

“We have another 55 000 gowns arriving today, and we are working on the acquisition internationally of more gowns, but it is a challenge. This follows changing the guidance 10 days ago which increased advice on the use of gowns. It is a big challenge, delivering against that new guidance.”

Hancock was also pressed for his views on healthcare staff reusing PPE as a last resort, as was proposed in a leaked document from Public Health England this week.²

He said, “Where there is a shortage in an individual setting, then it’s reasonable to follow WHO guidelines on what to do in those circumstances. In some cases reuse is advised by clinicians.”

No magic wand

Reflecting on what he described as a “global challenge” to meet the huge demand for PPE, Hancock said, “I would love to be able to wave a magic wand and have PPE fall from the sky in large quantities, and to say when shortages will be resolved;

but, given we have a global situation where there is less PPE in the world than the world needs, obviously it’s going to be a huge pressure point.”

Emphasising the importance of adhering to clinical guidelines on PPE so that it gets “where it needs to be,” he added, “It is a precious resource. That is one of the reasons that we’re ramping up the domestic manufacture to make sure we have more that’s made here and can go straight to the front line.”

The health secretary was also pressed on an inconsistency in the government’s PPE guidance for care workers, which states that PPE is not required to be worn in care homes for looking after patients without covid-19 but also states that, if the same patients were living at home, they would be in the shielding category and that all homecare workers who came to look after them would be required to wear masks.

Hancock replied, “I am very happy to look at that particular point in the guidance. I can see why people might read that as an inconsistency, and I’m very happy to take that away.”

He also updated the committee on how the government was progressing on its target to conduct 100 000 covid-19 tests a day by the end of April. He said that 18 665 tests were conducted on 16 April and that, after the increase in testing available for NHS staff, the proportion of NHS staff who were off work because they were self-isolating had fallen from 8.0% to 7.1%.

- 1 Sayburn A. Covid-19: PHE upgrades PPE advice for all patient contacts with risk of infection. *BMJ* 2020;369:m1391. doi: 10.1136/bmj.m1391-32245770
- 2 Titheradge N, Kirkland F. Coronavirus: “Last resort” plans revealed for PPE reuse by health workers. *BBC News* 2020 Apr 15. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-52288573>.

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