



# Covid-19: hoarding and misuse of protective gear is jeopardising the response, WHO warns

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The BMJ

Nearly 90 million face masks are required every month to protect health staff as they tackle covid-19, the World Health Organization has estimated, as it warned that current supplies were “rapidly depleting.”

The ability of countries to respond to the outbreak is being compromised by the “severe and increasing disruption to the global supply of personal protective equipment—caused by rising demand, hoarding, and misuse,” said WHO’s director general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

Speaking at the daily press briefing on 3 March, he warned that stopping the covid-19 outbreak would not be possible without protecting healthcare staff. To meet demands, production of this protective equipment must increase by 40% and governments must incentivise manufacturers to do so by easing restrictions on exports and distribution, said Ghebreyesus.

He warned, “Supplies can take months to deliver, market manipulation is widespread, and stocks are often sold to the highest bidder. WHO has shipped nearly half a million sets of personal protective equipment to 27 countries, but supplies are rapidly depleting.”

He said that the cost of such equipment had skyrocketed. “Prices of surgical masks have increased sixfold, N95 respirators have more than trebled, and gowns cost twice as much,” he explained.

## Safety concerns

GPs in Australia raised concerns about their safety to *The BMJ* last month because of a lack of personal protective equipment,

after they struggled to obtain face masks from suppliers.<sup>1</sup> The same issue is now being raised by doctors in the UK.<sup>2</sup>

The warning came after WHO launched a special mission to Iran, where an explosion of cases has seen more than 20 MPs contract the virus. So far 2336 cases have been confirmed in the country, but the real number is believed to be much higher, as the current case fatality rate is around 3.3%, while in other areas it is 1-2%.

The Iranian Medical Society, a UK group of Iranian doctors, said that Iran was struggling with “extreme shortage of protection gear for medical staff as well as patient diagnostic kits.”

In a statement calling for donations it said, “Stock is often low due to the rising price of medicines and medical equipment. Supplies are ever more rare due to the closure of the shared borders.”

The WHO team arrived with a shipment of medical supplies and protective equipment to support over 15 000 healthcare workers and enough laboratory kits to test and diagnose nearly 100 000 people. They will also assist with “strengthening and scaling up the response and readiness efforts.”

1 Mahase E. Novel coronavirus: Australian GPs raise concerns about shortage of face masks. *BMJ* 2020;368:m477. 10.1136/bmj.m477.32024636

2 Mahase E. Covid-19: retired doctors could be asked to return to work, says Hancock. *BMJ* 2020;368:m831. 10.1136/bmj.m831.32122881

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