PLASTIC PPE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Covid-19: Health and social care workers need, want, and deserve reusable FFP3 respirators

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Zhang and colleagues argue that single use personal protective equipment (PPE) is crucial for infection control in healthcare settings, but reusable options are better for the environment and healthcare systems. Organisations including the British Medical Association and Royal College of Nursing have written to the prime minister demanding FFP3 respirators to protect all healthcare workers against airborne transmission of covid-19. 6 The surgical masks commonly provided do not protect staff from SARS-CoV-2 respirable aerosol, produced by breathing, speaking, or coughing. 6 At least 930 UK health and social care workers have now died of covid-19; they are four times more likely to die than the general population, with many survivors affected by long covid. 7 Reusable FFP3 respirators would provide optimal, cost effective, and sustainable protection.

The wider seal (10-20 mm) of reusable FFP3 respirators offers better fit and more comfort. This is particularly pertinent for women and those of Asian ethnicity, who are more likely to have problems with fit; women make up 75% of the NHS workforce, and death rates from covid-19 are significantly higher in black and Asian people. 5 Most of the 487 staff polled by Medsupplydrive UK wanted reusable FFP3 respirators. They have approval from governing bodies, royal colleges, and unions. 6

By January 2021, the UK government had spent around £15.2bn (£17.8bn; $21.2bn) on PPE for the covid-19 pandemic, 6 the majority of which was single use. This is an environmental disaster, and disposable items will now be in landfill, the ocean, or the atmosphere after incineration. UK manufacturers of reusable PPE already exist, with local procurement reducing transport times and reliance upon precarious supply chains, while also creating jobs. Reusable PPE could produce cost savings. Autoclave, ultraviolet light, or 70% alcohol can be used for decontamination, tailored to manufacturer and local cleaning equipment. Multiple UK health boards have already successfully implemented reusable FFP3 respirators since March 2020. Reusable FFP3 respirators would provide UK health and social care workers with the lifesaving protection that they need, want, and deserve.

For more information visit www.medsupplydrive.org.uk or email info@medsupplydrive.org.uk. GCH is founder of Medsupplydrive UK (Scotland) and JH is founder of Medsupplydrive UK.

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