Covid-19: Bring back mandatory mask wearing in health settings, say Scottish workers

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Decisions taken to end the universal wearing of face masks in hospitals and doctors’ surgeries are placing patients and staff at greater risk of covid infection and need to be reversed, a group of healthcare workers in Scotland who are affected by long covid has said.

The Scottish Healthcare Workers Coalition, which is participating in the Scottish covid inquiry, described policies to withdraw mandatory mask wearing as flawed and dangerous and akin to playing “Russian roulette” with people’s lives.

The coalition has written to the Scottish government criticising guidance published in May that ended the requirement to wear masks. It says that covid has not gone away and 300 people die from the effects of the virus every week in the UK.

“Any decision that removes protection from the spread of SARS-CoV-2 puts those who are most vulnerable at greatest risk,” says the letter. It adds that healthcare workers are three to four times more likely to contract covid than the general population and that the NHS is failing in its duty under the Health and Safety at Work Act to provide a safe working environment.

The letter demands healthcare staff are given better access to well fitting respiratory protective equipment along with improved workplace ventilation and air filtration. The letter has been co-signed by campaign groups Long Covid Scotland and the Covid Pledge Campaign and individual doctors including Trisha Greenhalgh, professor of primary care health sciences at the University of Oxford, who has backed the use of facemasks since almost the start of the pandemic in the UK.2

One of the signatories, David Osborn, a chartered safety and health practitioner, said, “The World Health Organization continues to recommend universal masking policies in health and social care. It is unclear that any health and safety risk assessment was undertaken by the Scottish government before making their decision to abandon universal masking which is viewed by some patients as playing ‘Russian roulette’ with their health.”

Shaun Peter Qureshi from the Scottish Healthcare Workers Coalition said that vulnerable patients have legitimate concerns that they may endanger their health by visiting their GP or hospital. “The Scottish government must follow the evidence and improve protections from the airborne spread of SARS-CoV-2 in healthcare settings, not reduce them,” he said.

A spokesperson for the Scottish government described the May guidance as a “proportionate approach which recognises that Scotland continues to adapt to the pandemic and has entered a calmer phase. The removal of this extended guidance does not prevent staff, service users, or visitors from wearing a mask.”


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