

Coronavirus

‘I have never been so scared of walking into work.’ N.J. health care workers demand more protection amid coronavirus outbreak.

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By Susan K. Livio | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com

On Friday, a doctor in the intensive care unit at a hospital in Bergen County rapidly filling with coronavirus patients said an administrator called her “an alarmist” for wearing a protective mask and “scaring everyone” when she was outside of a patient’s room.

The physician, who requested anonymity out of fear she would lose her job, said she kept her mask on. “It is my policy to wear it. If I get sick, I can’t take care of people,” she said.

Defiant as she sounded, the physician admitted she is terrified. “I have never been so scared of walking into work. I always feel like I am going to get sick.” Wearing the mask is “one way I can feel a little protected.”

Five doctors and two nurses who spoke to NJ Advance Media say they are alarmed by the mixed messages from hospital administrators, who they say do not fully comprehend how desperate the situation has become.

They say they are frustrated the state Health Department and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have not set consistent standards on who should wear protective equipment and when. As masks and other supplies dwindle and they see their colleagues falling ill, they worry there will be a shortage of workers to treat the onslaught of patients predicted to arrive in the coming weeks and months.

Some of the health professionals interviewed are members of the New Jersey Doctor-Patient Alliance, an organization of about 300 physicians formed three years ago to give them a voice at the Statehouse on policy issues. They said they are speaking out now about the coronavirus because they are concerned they will pay the price for a lack of leadership.

“I am witnessing the epidemic hit health care workers. I know doctors are coming up positive like crazy,” said Stavros Christoudias of the Heritage Surgical Group in Bergen County and chairman of the Alliance’s board.

“We are in the fog of war and it’s thick right now,” Christoudias said. “For doctors like me who work in different hospitals, it’s extraordinarily disorienting. Who is telling the hospitals what to do? There should be someone at the state level saying you are going to do this to protect nurses and doctors. It seems like right now they are so far removed from the battle.”

Alliance members shared e-mail messages between a senior official at a Monmouth County hospital and a doctor who was forbidden from wearing a mask while performing rounds. They requested NJ Advance Media not publish the details to protect the anonymity of the doctor, who feared retribution.

“We have documents from some hospital officials and administrators who are threatening disciplinary action for anyone who wears masks outside patient rooms,” said Robert Morin, a plastic surgeon in Bergen County and an Alliance board member. “In a high-risk area, regardless of whether people are COVID-19 positive, doctors and nurses have the right to protect themselves.”

“One of our highest goals is to protect the nurses. They are all hospital-employed and they can’t speak out for themselves,” Morin said.

A nurse working in a Bergen County hospital who requested not to be identified said she was infuriated by photographs of health care workers in protective suits, covered from head-to-toe at the mobile screening post at Bergen Community College in Paramus. She herself does not have that equipment, she said.



A medical technician carries a specimen after testing someone at New Jersey's first government-run drive-thru coronavirus testing site Friday at Bergen Community College in Paramus. This image has been digitally altered to protect patient privacy. Aristide Economopoulos | NJ Adva

“Just to stand outside and swab, the nurse here is in completely different PPE (personal protective gear) than we are offered across the street at the hospital,” the nurse said in an email accompanying a photo from a testing site on Friday.

She also sent a photograph of the package of masks she and her colleagues are expected to use. The box is labeled “for cosmetic use only.”

“This is what we are supposed to wear when we care for coronavirus patients,” the nurse wrote. “This mask is not medical grade and it will in no way protect us.”

Kerry McKean Kelly, spokeswoman for the New Jersey Hospital Association, called finding personal protective equipment “the number one priority for our healthcare system right now.”

“We must protect our healthcare workers, but the current supply of personal protective equipment is insufficient. We can’t stress enough the importance of the federal government using the full breadth of its authority to bring more PPE to healthcare workers,” Kelly said.

“The CDC continues to update its guidance for extending the current supply until additional products arrive. That guidance includes measures like reusing PPE or using expired PPE -- neither of which would be the norm in the usual course of care but is necessary in these extenuating circumstances,” Kelly said.

Meanwhile, the hospital industry in the state has been instructed by Gov. Phil Murphy’s administration “to harmonize its policies to preserve PPE while still protecting hospital workers and the people they care for,” Kelly said.

“We understand the questions and concerns of healthcare workers - they are doing heroic work under very difficult circumstances,” she said.

During the daily media briefing call Sunday afternoon, Murphy was asked about whether he had heard some doctors and nurses had been discouraged from wearing masks.

“On masks, that’s a new one to me,” Murphy replied.

Murphy added that he and Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli have spoken to labor unions representing health care workers recently “about a lack of harmony, lack of standards across the many health systems in our state in terms of personal protection equipment and training.”

Persichilli, a registered nurse, said in an email earlier on Sunday she understands and empathizes with frontline healthcare workers. “We know they want to be safe so they can deliver care,” she said.

The health department is working with the NJ State Police Office of Emergency Management “to centralize management of the procurement, storage and distribution of the supplies in partnership with the New Jersey Hospital Association,” she said. She encouraged hospitals to follow the latest guidelines from the CDC on how to “optimize supplies.”

An emergency room nurse in a Bergen County hospital who requested anonymity to protect her job said that under normal circumstances, she would receive a new plastic face shield every time she encounters a new patient.

With supplies low, “we are wiping them down with bleach and reusing them. After a while, it leaves these white streaks and it’s difficult for us -- we can’t see anything,” the nurse said.

Working in the ER requires you to “always bring your A-game, but COVID-19 is testing her in ways she’s never imagined. She said she has hid in closets for a 2-minute crying break after a patient has died.

“I would love to be that nurse who is there at the bedside to calm them down. We don’t have time to sit down or take a water break,” she said.

Labor union representing nurses and health care workers say they are hearing similarly distressing stories and have relayed them to Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli in numerous telephone calls.

“One such story involved a nurse caring for an infected physician who was brought to tears as the physician advised her not to come in the room to care for him,” said Debbie White, president of Health Professionals and Allied Employees. “The physician said this because the nurse did not have the necessary protective equipment. Although we know he is correct and despite this employer’s failure to adhere to infection control practices to keep workers and patients safe, nurses still must do their job.”

“We can do better and we hope that we can make a difference in bringing all parties together to ensure our facilities are all following the same rules,” White said.