

Expert calls for Royal Commission to investigate why thousands of workers have been denied safeguards against COVID-19 infection

London, 29th April 2020: The safety of thousands of British workers has been put at risk during the COVID-19 pandemic because they have been denied standard health and safety protection, says one of the UK's leading experts in occupational health medicine, in an editorial published today in *Occupational Medicine Journal*.

Professor Raymond Agius says there should be an independent public enquiry, such as a Royal Commission, to investigate employers who have failed to protect workers at risk of COVID-19 because of the kind of work that they do.

Professor Agius, emeritus professor of occupational and environmental medicine at the University of Manchester, says: "The conclusion that during this pandemic thousands of workers may have been seriously jeopardised and denied the safeguards that are theirs by right is difficult to refute. Hopefully these matters will be substantively addressed by a wide ranging independent public enquiry such as a Royal Commission."

He said that lessons must be learnt at several levels - not least from the exposure of individuals at work to COVID-19 - and argues that any investigation of deaths or exposure to COVID-19 cannot be undertaken by employers, such as the NHS. Instead an independent body such as the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) should undertake the investigation. Employers have been told that unintended occupational exposures to the virus, falling ill or dying from COVID-19 must be reported to the HSE under health and safety legislation as a 'dangerous occurrence'.

Prof Agius adds that any doctor signing a death certificate is under an obligation to notify the coroner if they suspect that the person's death was "due to ... disease attributable to any employment held by the person".

When the lockdown is lifted there will be huge numbers of people returning to work. This must be accompanied by stringent protection of workers. Prof Agius says occupational health specialists can provide essential support to get the UK back to work.

Occupational health professionals can provide advice on traditional occupational hygiene measures such as segregation, ventilation and PPE, screening returning employees for symptoms and contact history, assessing risks of on-the-job exposure, and how to mitigate risk.

Prof Agius says: "Workers are owed rehabilitation, which may include redeployment, other help and understanding while they and their employers face change and challenge on an unprecedented scale. Occupational health specialists are competent and well experienced to advise about stresses on mental health ranging from adjustment disorders to burnout to post traumatic stress disorder. These conditions are bound to affect many workers who may present symptomatically or through sickness absence or presenteeism."

[ENDS]



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Notes to editors

About Occupational Medicine

Occupational Medicine is an international peer-reviewed journal, which provides vital information for the promotion of workplace health and safety. For more information please visit <https://academic.oup.com/occmed>

What is occupational health?

Occupational health helps people of working age access and stay in appropriate work and live full and healthy working lives despite underlying disabilities or health conditions. They help employers reduce sickness absence and increase productivity by providing advice on best practice and how to comply with legal duties such as the Equality Act 2010 and Health and Safety legislation. They advise on fitness for work, return to work programmes, workplace adjustments to enable people with health conditions to return to/remain at work, suitable alternative work and early retirement on ill health grounds.

Occupational clinicians interpret the instructions of the government and Public Health England/Health Protection Scotland and the most up-to-date clinical evidence to support businesses in keeping their workforce well. They use their combination of clinical expertise and deep understanding of how health affects work to empower managers and employers to make the right decisions, at the right time, to ensure the health both of their employees and their businesses e.g. what employers should do when workers are pregnant and what steps managers should take with their older and more vulnerable employees.

The need for robust and increasing occupational health (OH) services in many sectors has been highlighted during the COVID-19 crisis. The need for advice from occupational health doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, psychologists, hygienists, ergonomists etc. on all aspect of business policy, the adequacy of control and how to protect our workers continuing to face the public has never been greater, and is the core role of OH. Detailed functions of the OH team in the COVID-19 pandemic include:

- Risk assessments and advising on appropriate controls
- Face fit testing
- Advice on home working
- Advocacy - lobbying for appropriate controls (PPE specifically)
- Ensuring workers are well enough to be in work, in roles that need to continue
- Providing advice on vulnerable workers falling outside of the government advice
- Ensuring safety critical workers are fit to work/drive
- Advice on redeployment to suitable roles based on vulnerability
- Transport medicals
- Safety critical medicals
- Ensuring that those within the workforce remain well, advising on and providing mental health support and assessing those for whom health is worsening by being isolated/at home.

About The Society of Occupational Medicine

The Society of Occupational Medicine (SOM) is a multi-disciplinary professional society whose membership includes over 1,700 OH doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, occupational therapists and technicians. SOM Patrons are Lord Blunkett, Dame Carol Black and Sir Norman Lamb.