



Supporting occupational health
and wellbeing professionals

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6th April 2020 Work related fatalities due to COVID-19 exposure is not a given

The Society of Occupational Medicine (SOM) does not believe that work related fatalities due to COVID-19 exposure is a given. The UK should have aimed for a target of zero work caused fatalities in this pandemic within the NHS, essential services and UK business.

With proper application of controls, no worker should die of work acquired COVID-19. SOM is campaigning to raise awareness of the risks facing healthcare and other workers in the UK and internationally.

SOM is calling for PPE to be used effectively during the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of appropriate PPE must be supported by training, fit testing and management of compliance.

The new PPE guidance published by the Government is an improvement but the recommendations should be considered minimum protection. Where a higher level of protection is available, it should be used.

We are also pleased that the Health and Safety Executive has provided information on when dangerous occurrences related to COVID-19 and work-related exposure to COVID-19 is RIDDOR reportable. In addition, doctors are reminded that if they suspect that a death from COVID-19 may be attributable to the deceased's employment they have a legal obligation to notify HM Coroner (or the Procurator Fiscal in Scotland).

Given that COVID-19 infections contracted through work are RIDDOR reportable it is necessary that all potential work caused fatalities are investigated and any breakdown of exposure control identified. This will allow correction and dissemination of learning.

SOM is calling for robust and increasing access to occupational health (OH). The need for advice from OH doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, psychologists, hygienists, and ergonomists amongst other professional groups is required. The need to protect our workers has never been greater; protecting the workforce is the core role of OH.

SOM is supporting a multidisciplinary drive across sectors to raise awareness, share knowledge and engage employees in solutions. It is encouraging workplaces to design-in exposure prevention measures as advised by the Health and Safety Executive - helping employees take the opportunity to better understand the risks and demonstrate good practice in their work.

Notes to editors:

1. On 2 April 2020 the Government published updated guidance about the safe use of PPE. The most recent version is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/wuhan-novel-coronavirus-infection-prevention-and-control/covid-19-personal-protective-equipment-ppe>
2. Any disease attributed to an occupational exposure to a biological agent is classified as a RIDDOR reportable occupational disease, on 3 April 2020 the Health and Safety Executive provided guidance in



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relation to this: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/news/riddor-reporting-coronavirus.htm>. In the same guidance the Health and Safety Executive has highlighted when dangerous occurrences related to COVID-19 are RIDDOR reportable.

3. The Notification of Deaths Regulations 2019 indicates the legal obligations of doctors when deaths are attributable to employment: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2019/1112/made>

About The Society of Occupational Medicine (SOM)

- 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.
- SOM is informing NHS England as to the capacity in the OH private sector to support the NHS. Private providers of OH are currently less busy and could be “redeployed” to assist the NHS and more.
- SOM’s journal *Occupational Medicine* is an international peer-reviewed journal that provides vital information for the promotion of workplace health and safety. Recent articles include: COVID-19 and experiences of moral injury in frontline key workers and Occupational risks for COVID-19 infection. For more information see: <https://academic.oup.com/occmed>
- OH helps people of working age access and stay in appropriate work and live full and healthy working lives despite underlying disabilities or health conditions. Occupational health helps employers to 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. The value of OH is set out in Occupational Health: the value proposition https://www.som.org.uk/sites/som.org.uk/files/Occupational_health_the_value_proposition_0.pdf; Occupational Health: The Global Evidence and Value https://www.som.org.uk/sites/som.org.uk/files/OH-the_global_evidence_and_value_Apr_2018.pdf; and The Value of Occupational Health to Workplace Wellbeing <https://www.som.org.uk/value-occupational-health-workplace-wellbeing-register-your-free-copy>. In June 2019, the Society of Occupational Medicine (SOM) published an evidence-based report on ‘The Value of Occupational Health Research’ https://www.som.org.uk/sites/som.org.uk/files/SOM_Value_OH_Research_June2019.pdf, funded by the Health and Safety Executive. It identified the important impact of workplace ill health on UK productivity, the high associated economic costs and the unmet need for effective research to guide future policy.
- OH 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 OH multidisciplinary teams 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. The function of the OH team is to:
 - Ensure those within the workplace are safe
 - Undertake risk assessments and advise on appropriate controls
 - Perform face fit testing
 - Advise on home working
 - Advocate, for instance lobbying for appropriate controls (PPE specifically)
 - Ensure workers are well enough to be in work
 - Provide advice on vulnerable workers falling outside of the government advice
 - Ensuring safety critical workers continue to be fit to work/drive
 - Advise on redeployment to suitable roles based on vulnerability
 - Provide mental health support and signpost workers to appropriate services

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