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## **Society of Occupational Medicine calls for a goal of zero workplace deaths due to COVID-19 on World Day for Safety and Health at Work**

**London, 28<sup>th</sup> April:** As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, The Society of Occupational Medicine (SOM) is today renewing its call for the UK government to prevent any further work-related deaths.

Scores of UK healthcare workers have already died from COVID-19 infections and their deaths will be marked today at 11am with a moment's silence. But at SOM, we do not believe that work-related fatalities due to COVID-19 exposure are inevitable. In fact, we believe a goal of zero work-caused fatalities is achievable.

Today is the World Day for Safety and Health at Work, an initiative supported by the United Nations. SOM backs the aim of raising awareness on the adoption of safe practices in workplaces and the role that occupational safety and health (OSH) services play.

As politicians discuss the end of the lockdown and people plan their return to work, we believe it is essential that all employers conduct risk assessments to ensure the safety of all employees.

With the proper application of safe systems of work and the use of a hierarchy of control, no worker should die of work-acquired COVID-19.

Concern has been raised about the shortcomings of and lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), but PPE should be considered the lowest form of protection. Employers must consider a range of controllable factors in the work environment and this includes the use of design, engineering and administrative controls.

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

SOM is also 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.

### **Dr Will Ponsonby, Society of Occupational Medicine President said:**

"The UK could and should have aimed for a target of zero work-caused fatalities in this pandemic. The need to protect our workers has never been greater, and that goal must be put in place as the foundation for all future planning."

### **Notes to editors:**

1. World Day for Safety and Health at Work dates back to 2003. This year, its aim is to stimulate national tripartite dialogue on safety and health at work and raise awareness on the adoption of safe practices in workplaces and the role that occupational safety and health (OSH) services play. It will also focus on the medium to long-term, including recovery and future preparedness integrating measures into OSH management systems and policies at the national and enterprise levels. <https://www.un.org/en/observances/work-safety-day>
2. The Society of Occupational Medicine's campaign for a goal of zero work-caused COVID-19 fatalities is supported by the [BMA](#), the [BDA](#), [The Doctors' Association](#), [ROSPA](#), [FOHN](#), [BOHS](#), [IOH](#), [IOM](#), [CIEHF](#), [British Society of Dental Hygiene and Therapy](#) and the Rt Hon Gordon Brown.



Supporting occupational health  
and wellbeing professionals

2 St Andrews Place  
London NW1 4LB  
Telephone: 020 3910 4531

admin@som.org.uk  
www.som.org.uk

3. 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.
4. SOM's journal *Occupational Medicine* produces articles such as COVID-19 and experiences of moral injury in frontline key workers (see <https://doi.org/10.1093/occmed/kqaa052>). SOM publishes statements e.g. on testing and PPE procurement at [www.som.org.uk](http://www.som.org.uk)
5. Occupational health (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. 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. 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](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](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 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](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.
6. 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.
7. 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 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 are:
  - ensuring those within the workplace are safe through
  - 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
  - and 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.

Contact: [nick.pahl@som.org.uk](mailto:nick.pahl@som.org.uk) Tel: 0203 910 4537 Mobile 07969 279 149

Nick Pahl | CEO, SOM 2 St Andrews Place | London | NW1 4LB | [www.som.org.uk](http://www.som.org.uk)