

Plea for masks, gloves as anxious French health workers face virus

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Fearful health workers across France sounded an alarm Monday over a lack of protective gear as hospitals, with hundreds of coronavirus patients in critical care, braced for an onslaught of new cases.

With more than 5,000 people officially recorded as infected in the country and some 400 in serious condition, France is scrambling to slow the spread of COVID-19 by implementing [travel restrictions](#), closing non-essential retail businesses and limiting people's movements.

But there are fears that hospitals could become overwhelmed.

"We feel like we are going to the front, a little like we are infantry," said a nurse from the Edouard-Herriot [hospital](#) in Lyon, requesting anonymity, who said there was a lack of screening for even the healthcare workers most likely to be exposed.

"We are told that we are heroes but we are firstly professionals and above all we want to be protected."

Mustapha Soussi, doctor in charge of emergencies at the hospital in La Mure in the Hautes-Alpes region, said one practitioner had threatened not to come into work.

"Staff are worried about the lack of masks, we fear possible infection because we are in the front line," he said.

Concerns over masks, hand sanitiser and gloves were particularly acute among community health providers. "We have zero equipment," said Kaouther ben Amor, a home nurse in the Mediterranean port city of Marseille and a mother of a little girl.

She and her colleagues provide in-home care to some 30 patients.

"I had to beg for masks at the pharmacy," she said, adding that she was able to buy only 10.

She shared them with a colleague who could not get any because the

pharmacies are out of stock and now has to wear the same mask for her entire working day, from 5:30am to midday, and then 3pm to 8pm.

"We are afraid for our patients, for us," she told AFP. "We are crying out for help because we lack resources."

"But of course, we continue to treat our patients because it is crucial for them—we must take care of them!"

Luc Lavaud, a general practitioner in Saint-Georges-de-Mons in the central Puy-de-Dome region said he planned to provide masks and hand sanitiser for anyone arriving at his office with a cough.

But he said the plan would only work for so long.

"I have 50 masks left. And after that?"

'Who will go in our place?'

Also on Monday, the country's National Order of Nurses called for emergency measures to provide protective equipment like [masks](#), eye protectors and gloves to a wide range of health workers, including doctors, pharmacists, nurses, dentists, physiotherapists and midwives.

"Health professionals must not become vectors of contamination," it said in a statement.

The nursing group also called for special measures, like shared childcare arrangements, to help boost the nursing workforce.

Even with protective equipment, some health workers said they were fearful of the virus.

Amarylis, a 39-year-old emergency nurse at the hospital in the southeastern city of Valence said she had just discovered that a 90-year-old patient she had been in contact with over the weekend had tested positive.

In her department a colleague has already contracted the disease. Amarylis worries about how to protect her family and has decided not to see her children for 15 days as a precaution.

But her fears are not enough to dissuade her from going to work. "If we don't go, who will go in our place?"

Eva Defix, a 36-years-old emergency nurse at the Puy-en-Velay hospital in southern France, said she was "a little afraid" because the best countermeasure against the new [coronavirus](#) is isolation.

"We bathe in it permanently, 12 hours in a row," said the mother of two daughters, three and six. "That inevitably generates anxiety."

Her husband is looking after the children, although she says shared childcare at the hospital and at schools is being offered.

Which is good because she expects to work overtime.

Bianca Fazi, an emergency doctor at Ajaccio hospital in Corsica and member of the French island's executive health council, said emergency doctors are likely to be the least afraid, even though they know the risks.

"I'm pretty fatalistic," she said, but she added that the [health](#) system would likely have to carry the strain for a prolonged period.

"The epidemic promises to be long."

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