

20 August 2021
The Hon. Brad Hazzard MP
NSW Minister for Health

c.c Elizabeth Koff, Secretary, NSW Health
Dr Nigel Lyons, Deputy Secretary, Health System Strategy and Planning
Dr Kerry Chant, Chief Health Officer, NSW Health

Re: Workplace safety in NSW hospitals

Dear Minister,

The Australian Society of Anaesthetists (ASA) is a not-for-profit membership organisation representing Australian Anaesthetists. Our members are proud of the fact that Australia is one of the safest countries in the world to undergo surgery. The ASA was established in 1934 and through education and advocacy, supports the Profession to ensure these high standards are maintained.

Anaesthetists are playing a key role in the fight against COVID-19 in Australia. As a speciality, we are closely linked with Intensive Care Medicine, with a good number of ICU colleagues being dual trained in both anaesthesia and intensive care. In regional centres, anaesthetists are often responsible for ICU work, or after-hours ICU work.

Even in metropolitan areas within Sydney, we are being relied upon to provide surge capacity care in ICUs and are frequently involved with resuscitation of critically ill patients and intra/inter-hospital retrievals and transfers.

Anaesthetists are also responsible for airway management across the hospital, in conjunction with ICU and emergency medicine. Due to the nature of our profession, we are intimately linked to the treatment and management of COVID-19 patients, and are involved in some of the most high-risk aspects of their care.

By this we mean the high-risk procedure of airway management, especially intubation for ventilation or for surgery. As such, we have become increasingly concerned about the transmission of SARS-CoV-2 in NSW hospitals. Our members are experiencing inconsistencies regarding the implementation of safety protocols and we are receiving many reports of health care professionals encountering serious personal risk in the workplace.

The situation is very dire. We call on you, as the Minister of Health, to take swift action to ensure all NSW Hospitals uphold the highest standards of workplace safety. This includes private hospitals working in partnership with the Government. There is no room for interpretation by hospital administrators regarding what 'good safety' looks like. We seek across-the-board adoption of the Hierarchy of Hazard controls which offers a comprehensive approach, as follows:

Elimination

- Increased human resources to transfer suspected or positive COVID-19 patients and their family members/ social supports through hospitals.
- Recording and prompt communication of positive cases of health workers to enable prompt quarantining.
- Pre-admission testing with rapid turnaround to identify and appropriately stream patients.

Engineering Controls

- Increased ventilation and provision of fresh air and negative pressure treatment areas.
- Increased rest and relaxation space for staff.
- Increased change room and bathroom facilities for staff.
- Avoidance of the use of shared phones and desks.

Administrative Controls

- Work from home where possible.
- Reduced crowding.
- Provision of monitored patient and staff red (COVID-19) and green (safe) zones.
- Cohort rostering to reduce cross contamination of staff.
- Allocation of PPE and safety observation and coaching roles.
- Plentiful staff rostering and reduction in hours to avoid fatigue.
- Thorough and regular sanitation of workplaces including fomites such as phones, desks, computer keyboards.

Personal Protective Equipment Requirements

- Mandate the wearing of P2/N95 respirators in high-risk clinical areas when interacting with known or suspected COVID-19 cases
- Availability of Powered Air Purifying Respirators (PAPR) for any staff who have prolonged exposure to COVID-19 patients
- Only P2/N95 respirators that have been tested and meet the requirements of AS/NZS1716:2012 or NIOSH-42CFR84 are to be issued
- All healthcare workers provided P2/N95 respiratory protection must be provided training and respirator fit testing for the type to be worn
- Surgical masks, gowns, hair covers, gloves, and eye protection be available for all staff in clinical settings

In addition, we call for:

- All patients and health care professionals that work within red alert LGAs to be COVID-19 tested every 3 days. This includes clinical staff and VMOs at partnered private hospitals. Rapid Antigen Testing is needed to prevent delays and workforce shortages.
- All health care workers to be required to show proof of vaccination before working in Hospitals.
- Recognition that the critical care setting includes the Emergency, ICU, Surgery & Anaesthetic Departments. (Previously, surgery and anaesthetics were omitted from the Group 1A vaccination rollout which has placed many specialists at risk).
- A method of compliance auditing to be introduced to ensure best practice safety standards are being upheld across all NSW Hospitals.

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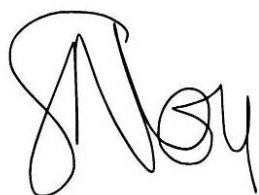
As this pandemic worsens the protection of our healthcare workers is of paramount importance. No surgery can proceed without anaesthetists, and we are concerned that many of our members are reporting considerable stress and anxiety arising relating to hospital safety.

Your reassurance that the NSW Hospital system can guarantee a safe workplace will go a long way toward supporting the physical and psychological wellbeing of our frontline clinicians and nurses.

We welcome the opportunity to meet with you and discuss these concerns in more detail, and we look forward to your prompt response.

If you require any further information or would like to discuss further, please do not hesitate to contact Mr. Jason Alam, Policy Manager on (02) 8556 9728 or via email at jalam@asa.org.au.

Sincerely,



Dr. Suzi Nou
President
Australian Society of Anaesthetists



Dr. Lan-Hoa Le
NSW State Committee Chair
Australian Society of Anaesthetists

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