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High proportion of healthcare workers with COVID-19 in Italy is a stark warning to the world: protecting nurses and their colleagues must be the number one priority

Geneva, Switzerland, 19 March 2020 – Italy’s healthcare workers sacrificing their health in the battle to combat COVID-19 lack sufficient protective equipment to keep them safe. The International Council of Nurses (ICN) and the Italian Nurses Association (CNAI) are warning of the dire consequences of not supplying adequate person protective equipment for nurses working with patients who have COVID-19.

Latest figures show that healthcare workers make up 9% of Italy’s COVID-19 cases.

The high rate of infections among nurses and other healthcare staff is a serious concern because workers who are infected must stay away from work for at least 14 days, depleting the already exhausted workforce.

President of the Italian Nurses Association (CNAI) Walter de Caro said:

“Italy is engaged in a “war” with this virus. Hospitals in the north are overrun and there are no free intensive care beds in the Lombardy region. Great efforts are being made to provide new facilities in the field in these very difficult times. There are issues around planning and resources and there is need for more intensive care specialist nurses.

‘All Italians have to stand together to acknowledge the sacrifice, commitment and heroism of all our nurses, including newly graduated nurses, retired nurses, military nurses, health support staff and volunteers.

‘Some hospitals do have enough Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), but in most cases, nurses and doctors are forced to wear masks which are far past their effective use, and in some hospitals in central and southern Italy, staff have no PPE at all.

‘Colleagues have told me they feel like they are going into battle with paper shields and toy guns. We need these supplies now, not tomorrow.’”

ICN CEO Howard Catton said:

“Nurses are the frontline in the fight against COVID-19 in Italy and elsewhere, and they have been working non-stop to care for these very sick patients, many of whom are on ventilators and require complex 24-hour care.

‘Of course nurses are stepping up and answering the call for help, but they are not superheroes or angels: they are women and men who have children and families and

friends and responsibilities, and they must be protected from the risks that caring for patients with COVID-19 poses.

‘They must be tested for the virus and have the PPE they need so that they can carry on their duties without fear for their own safety and that of their families.

‘It is unacceptable for them to have to work without sufficient protection and governments must put robust supply chains in place now. The world is watching.

‘For many weeks now ICN has been warning about the critical situation regarding protective equipment for nurses and their deteriorating work conditions. We know these are exceptional times, but more action is required.’

Latest figures show that Italy has had more than 41,000 COVID-19 cases at least 2,609 of them among healthcare workers, more than 15,000 hospitalized, 2,498 patients are in intensive care units and at least 2,609 of them are among healthcare workers. The number of deaths has reached 3,405, more than in China.

Analysis of 8,802 cases in Italy showed that 5% of patients became critically, with 24% severely ill, 45.1% experiencing moderate symptoms, 7.2% mild symptoms, 12.2% non-specific symptoms and 6.5% being asymptomatic.

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Note to Editors

The **International Council of Nurses** (ICN) is a federation of more than 130 national nurses’ associations representing the millions of nurses worldwide. Operated by nurses and leading nursing internationally, ICN works to ensure quality care for all and sound health policies globally.

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