



21st December 2023

Dame Ruth May
Chief Nursing Officer for England
NHS England

Via email

Dear Ruth

RE: World Health Organisation's Media Statement: Covid 19 variant of interest JN.1

I am writing to you in response to yesterday's [media statement](#) from the World Health Organisation (WHO) on the Covid 19 variant of interest, JN.1. As you can imagine, we at the RCN are keen to know what action you and NHSE colleagues will be taking in response to this statement.

Whilst WHO state that available evidence indicates that the global public health risks from the variant are low, they point out that the onset of winter in the Northern hemisphere JN.1 could increase the burden of respiratory infections in many countries.

In this context, WHO advises health workers and health facilities to:

- Implement universal masking in health facilities, as well as appropriate masking, respirators and other PPE for health workers caring for suspected and confirmed COVID-19 patients.
- Improve ventilation in health facilities.

The existing [National infection prevention and control manual \(NIPCM\) for England](#) does not require standardised universal masking for SARS-CoV-2 and decisions on respiratory protective equipment (respirators) are left to local risk assessments, and often the senior nurse, which is inconsistent with this WHO advice.

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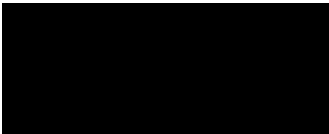


We also have concerns about the adequacy of ventilation in general ward and outpatient areas within hospital buildings and believe that action must be taken to assess and improve this.

I am mindful of the current unsustainable pressures on the health service, with the latest UKHSA dashboard showing a rise in cases and hospitalisations with COVID 19, alongside other respiratory viruses in general circulation. I am concerned that without proper protections ill health and sickness will continue to rise in nursing staff and impact on their ability to deliver safe and effective patient care. We are also concerned about the increased risks to patients from hospital acquired respiratory infections.

I therefore ask that you take urgent steps to seek a revision to the NIPCM for England, and for this to introduce universal implementation of the two measures advised by the WHO. I would be grateful for a response from you on your course of action, and I hope to be able to assure RCN members that appropriate action is being taken by NHSE.

Yours sincerely



Patricia Marquis
RCN England Director

CC Susan Hopkins Chief Medical Adviser UKHSA

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