
Top cancer hospital in U.S. faces mask shortages

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New York, March 19 (RHC)-- U.S. hospitals are reportedly grappling with a shortage of personal protective equipment as the coronavirus crisis deepens across the country. One of the country's top cancer hospitals, Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York, has informed its staff it has a shortage of masks and other personal protective equipment, or PPE, even as at least five employees and three patients have been diagnosed with coronavirus, COVID-19, American news website, BuzzFeed News said.

The hospital said last Friday afternoon it has only a week's supply of masks on hand. Reports say hospitals around the U.S. are wrestling with shortages of PPE, beds, and ventilators amid mounting numbers of infected patients. But the shortage is particularly troubling at cancer hospitals, including Sloan Kettering, the country's oldest and largest private cancer hospital, because cancer treatments like chemotherapy and radiation therapy can leave patients with compromised immune systems.

"Cancer patients, by nature of the fact that they're receiving chemotherapy, are naturally at increased risk of infection" said Andrew Chapman, chief of cancer

services of the Sidney Kimmel Cancer Center at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital in Philadelphia.

A Sloan Kettering hospital spokesperson acknowledged the shortage of personal protective equipment, saying that officials are working to find sufficient supplies from other sources as production and distribution delays continue in China, where the coronavirus outbreak was believed to be first detected in December. Kreg Kolford, Sloan Kettering hospital's senior vice president of supply chain and sustaining care said that many US hospitals "are in much worse condition."

The scarcity of protective masks, eye shields, gowns, and other supplies for the caregivers on the front lines of the fight against the coronavirus has raised concerns in the federal government and at the state and local level.

Last week, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) revised its recommendations for PPE, saying that more protective equipment including N95 respirator masks were not necessary for most healthcare workers other than those directly caring for infected people or individuals suspected of carrying the virus.

In response, the American Nurses Association sent a letter to congressional leaders asking for more transparency from the CDC about the transmission of COVID-19 in order to assess whether face masks were sufficient protection for health care workers.

U.S. nurses unions have sounded the alarm over the shortage of protective equipment, with the New York State Nurses Association, saying, "We're prepared to go forward, but at some point, we will run low on and perhaps run out of a critical care implement — the N95 respirator. You really can't care for patients without proper equipment."

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo said ICU beds in the state are currently at 80% capacity. On Monday, the governor said that the health care system was facing "an avalanche" if between 40 and 70% of the state — or about 8-12 million New Yorkers — becomes infected.

U.S. cases of the coronavirus have passed 4,400, with at least 86 fatalities as of early morning Tuesday. The White House has advised people not to gather in groups of more than 10 as the outbreak spreads across the US.

New research published in the journal Science on Monday suggests that transmission by people who are not yet experiencing symptoms of the illness may be responsible for the vast majority of documented cases of COVID-19 in China.

Edited by Ed Newman

