

February 2, 2022

Hon. Adrian Dix
Minister of Health
PO BOX 9050
STN PROV GOVT.
Victoria, BC, V8W 9E2

Email: HLTH.Minister@gov.bc.ca

Re: Meeting request to address ongoing concerns related to Omicron variant transmission

Dear Minister Dix:

I write following our letter sent to you Dec. 29, 2021, in which we raised a number of concerns related to the risks associated with the COVID-19 Omicron variant.

Of particular concern was BCNU members' inability to consistently access appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), even when performing a patient care risk assessment. Today, health employers continue to demand that our members conduct a PCRA to be allowed access to an N95 respirator. This, despite the established evidence of aerosolized transmission of the virus. In the previous letter we insisted that the provincial PPE allocation framework be updated to reflect the science. We have yet to receive a response.

In the four weeks since our previous letter was sent, the Omicron variant has established itself in many communities, with a five-fold increase in hospitalization rates. This massive increase is having a devastating effect on our health human resources. In the week following my previous letter, nearly 28,000 shifts were missed due to short-term illness (Jan. 3 – Jan. 9, 2022), nearly double the number of missed shifts during this same time period in 2020.

I am increasingly concerned for nurses' health and safety as public health officials and health authorities attempt to address the crisis by revising policies and patient care guidelines.

Over the past 12 months, workers in the nursing occupation have registered the highest number COVID-19 illness claims with WorkSafeBC. Nurse aides, orderlies and patient service associates account for the next-highest number of registered claims. This data suggests that protective measures in place in health-care settings are not enough.

There is now broad consensus among the international scientific community that aerosolized spread is the primary mode of transmission of the Omicron variant. However, your ministry continues to adhere to outdated prevention measures based on droplet precautions. Once again, I insist that the current provincial PPE allocation framework be updated to list aerosolized spread as the primary method of spread for this virus rather than droplet spread. It is important that documentation clearly reflect this change. Doing so will provide health employers with the necessary guidance to ensure nurses and all health-care workers in this province are protected to the highest standard available.

Since we last wrote, you have also changed the way in which COVID-19 outbreaks are declared. Previously, the outbreak declaration process was straightforward and well-understood by all clinicians, which resulted in additional immediate safety and infection control measures being taken.

Our members continue to report that the new COVID-19 outbreak declaration guidelines are confusing. They also appear to be unevenly applied. This negatively impacts nurses' ability to secure the additional resources needed to manage the provision of care. We are calling on you to immediately clarify the circumstances under which a COVID-19 outbreak is declared in all care settings and share this information, in detail, with the union, working nurses and the public.

Meanwhile, we continue to call on you to keep our members safe and ensure they have all the resources they need to minimize or eliminate the transmission of COVID-19 within health-care workplaces.

Impact of COVID-19 on retention

The province's most recent labour market outlook (2019) calls for the hiring of upwards of 24,000 nurses by 2029 in order to properly staff the health-care system. There is no doubt that the pre-existing nurse staffing crisis has been greatly exacerbated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, working nurses continue to bear the brunt of this shortage, often at the cost of their own mental health and physical safety.

Nurses are exhausted and have been burnt out for months. In May 2021, long before latest variants and increase in hospitalization rates, 51 percent of our members working in emergency departments and intensive care units told they were likely to leave the profession by 2023.

Deteriorating conditions in our health-care facilities also mean nurses are left to withstand violence and harassment at alarming rates. This reality is yet another symptom of the nursing shortage that has plagued our health-care system for far too long.

When I speak publicly about safe patient care, I am talking about ensuring we have the appropriate number of nurses to care for patients based on the severity of illness and level of care necessary. Achieving this goal will require serious and sustained financial commitment from your government to ensure we can recruit, educate and retain the nurses this province needs.

In the absence of a response to our Dec. 29 letter, I am requesting a meeting to directly address the concerns we have raised. We are available at your earliest convenience. In the meantime, the 2022 provincial budget will be tabled this month, and in the coming weeks BCNU members will be engaging all MLAs and asking them to consider how their constituents have been impacted by our struggling health-care system – and what they plan to do about it. On behalf of all of our members, I implore you to do the same by prioritizing BC's nurses and seriously addressing our province's critical nurse shortage.

Sincerely,

BC NURSES' UNION



Aman Grewal, President

c.c. Hon. John Horgan, Premier
Hon. Harry Bains, Minister of Labour
Trevor Hughes, Deputy Minister of Labour
Stephen Brown, Deputy Minister of Health
Michael McMillan, President & CEO, HEABC
Jim Gould, Interim CEO, BC Nurses' Union
Moninder Singh, Executive Lead, External Relations & Communications, BC Nurses' Union