

May 26, 2020

The Hon. Harry Bains,
Minister of Labour
Room 342 Parliament Buildings
Victoria, BC V8V 1X4

RE: WSBC Presumptive Coverage for Nurses for COVID-19 Infections as an Occupational Disease

Dear Minister Bains,

As of May 21, 2020, there are 81,313 confirmed cases and presumptive cases in Canada, with 6,152 confirmed deaths¹. In BC, our numbers indicate there are 2,479 confirmed and 152 deaths². As of May 15, 2020, WSBC confirms only 82 allowed claims for COVID-19 exposure in the healthcare and social services sectors, despite receiving 202 applications for compensation³. The COVID-19 pandemic has no end in sight and our top health experts, such as Dr. Theresa Tam anticipate we may experience a second wave of infections later in the year⁴. The COVID-19 virus is a new virus; this means our knowledge regarding infection, transmission and re-infection is not only limited but, in some instances, changes daily.

Nurses are designated essential workers in the province of BC, recognizing the work that nurses do as essential to preserving life, health, and public safety⁵ during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nurses provide not only essential services that British Columbians have come to rely on in their daily lives, but their services extend into supporting basic societal functioning⁶. Nurses are highly educated professionals that perform assessments and procedures, as well as provide “health” care to compromised and critically ill patients - often in high risk, dynamic environments.

It is our position the current healthcare work environment places our BC nurses at increased risk for COVID-19 infection as an occupational disease. Furthermore, we argue the risk of a working nurse contracting the COVID-19 virus is significantly greater than the ordinary exposure risk for the public at large in BC. We draw attention to the current situation in the province of Ontario which confirms healthcare workers, such as nurses, working in hospitals, long term care facilities and community settings are being diagnosed with COVID-19 at an alarming rate⁷.

For example, as of May 15, 2020, provincial data confirmed healthcare workers in Ontario made up nearly 17% of all cases, whereas they had previously represented approximately 10% of all cases in early April. Moreover, by this date 714 nurses had tested positive for COVID-19, with provincial data confirming several hundred outbreaks directly within long-term care facilities and hospital units⁸. These are alarming trends and from these numbers we know nine health care workers have died, including a nurse, two hospital cleaners and six personal support

¹ Government of Canada. (May 21, 2020). Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): Outbreak update.

² Ibid.

³ WorkSafeBC (May 13, 2020). “COVID-19 claims data by industry”. Referenced from: <https://www.worksafebc.com/en/about-us/covid-19-updates/claims/covid-19-claims-by-industry-sector>

⁴ Global News (March 25, 2020). “A second wave of Covid-19 is possible”. Referenced from: <https://globalnews.ca/tag/theresa-tam/>

⁵ Government of BC (n.d.). List of COVID-19 Essential Services. Referenced from: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/emergency-preparedness-response-recovery/covid-19-provincial-support/essential-services-covid-19>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ CBC News (May 15, 2020). “Nurses, lab workers, physicians among 'alarming' number of health-care workers with COVID-19”. Referenced from: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/health-care-workers-covid-19-alarming-rate-1.5568711>

⁸ Ibid.

workers⁹. A dire message has been sent to the public from staff working in the trenches, warning that “*even the best efforts of front-line staff aren't enough to mitigate the spread of the new coronavirus among their peers within health-care settings*”¹⁰.

We understand as of June 1, 2020, WSBC is starting a consultation process for presumption of infections caused by communicable viral pathogens, including COVID-19¹¹. While BCNU will fully participate in the WSBC stakeholder and public consultation process, we are concerned this process may be unreasonably slow and unable to respond in a timely manner given the acuteness of the COVID-19 pandemic situation that BC and the rest of Canada is currently facing. We insist BC nurses should not have to deal with potential bureaucratic delays due to the consultation process and implementation of policy changes at the front-line level. It is the BCNU's position that the BC workers' compensation system needs to provide immediate presumptive coverage as an occupational disease to nurses who are diagnosed and/or test positive for COVID-19. The BC Nurses' Union is calling on the BC government to ensure any nurse who is exposed to COVID-19 is compensated through WSBC presumptive coverage as an occupational disease.

Sincerely,

BRITISH COLUMBIA NURSES' UNION



Christine Sorensen
President

cc.

Hon. Adrian Dix, Minister of Health
John Martin, MLA, Chilliwack, Labour Critic
Norm Letnick, MLA, Kelowna-Lake Country, Health Critic
Adam Olsen, MLA, Saanich North and the Islands, Interim Leader - BC Green Party

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ WorkSafeBC (May 21, 2020). Planned consultation on adding a presumption for infections caused by communicable viral pathogens (including COVID -19). Referenced from: <https://www.worksafebc.com/en/about-us/news-events/announcements/2020/May/planned-consultation-adding-presumption-infections-caused-communicable-viral-pathogens>