



HEALTHCARE SAFETY  
INVESTIGATION BRANCH

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# National Intelligence Report

## Personal protective equipment (PPE): care workers delivering homecare during the Covid-19 response

Independent report by the  
**Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch** I2020/014

August 2020



HEALTHCARE SAFETY  
INVESTIGATION BRANCH



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At HSIB we welcome feedback on our investigation reports. The best way to share your views and comments is to email us at [enquiries@hsib.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@hsib.org.uk). We aim to provide a response to all correspondence within five working days.

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## About HSIB

The Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch (HSIB) conducts independent investigations of patient safety concerns in NHS-funded care across England. Most harm in healthcare results from problems within the systems and processes that determine how care is delivered. Our investigations identify the contributory factors that have led to harm or the potential for harm to patients. The recommendations

we make aim to improve healthcare systems and processes, to reduce risk and improve safety. Our organisation values independence, transparency, objectivity, expertise and learning for improvement. We work closely with patients, families and healthcare staff affected by patient safety incidents, and we never attribute blame or liability to individuals.

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## Considerations in light of Covid-19

A number of investigations were in progress when the Covid-19 pandemic significantly affected the UK. Observation and engagement visits to hospitals necessarily ceased at this time. A decision needed to be made as to whether investigations were sufficiently advanced to publish their findings or to wait until they could be recommenced. For this investigation,

even though the impact of Covid-19 may have adjusted the processes being carried out in the clinical setting, it was thought that the findings would be unlikely to change and so it was agreed to publish the report. Any alterations to clinical care due to Covid-19, with a patient safety impact, may be the subject of a future investigation.

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## National Intelligence Reports

National Intelligence Reports (NIRs) provide new insight into current patient safety risks identified by HSIB. They include analysis and key information for consideration by

relevant stakeholders to facilitate a response. When appropriate NIRs will include safety observations and safety actions, they will not include safety recommendations.

## Our investigations

Our team of investigators and analysts have diverse experience working in healthcare and other safety critical industries and are trained in human factors and safety science. We consult widely in England and internationally to ensure that our work is informed by appropriate clinical and other relevant expertise.

We undertake patient safety investigations through two programmes:

### Maternity investigations

From 1 April 2018, we have been responsible for all NHS patient safety investigations of maternity incidents which meet criteria for the **Each Baby Counts programme** (Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, 2015) and also maternal deaths (excluding suicide). The purpose of this programme is to achieve learning and improvement in maternity services, and to identify common themes that offer opportunity for system-wide change. For these incidents HSIB's investigation replaces the local investigation, although the Trust remains responsible for meeting the Duty of Candour and for referring the incident to us. We work closely with parents and families, healthcare staff and organisations during an investigation. Our reports are provided directly back to the families and to the trust. Our safety recommendations are based on the information derived from the investigations and other sources such as audit and safety studies, made with the intention of preventing future, similar events. These are for actions

to be taken directly by the trust, local maternity network and national bodies.

Our reports also identify good practice and actions taken by the Trust to immediately improve patient safety.

Since 1 April 2019 we have been operating in all NHS Trusts in England.

We aim to make safety recommendations to local and national organisations for system-level improvements in maternity services. These are based on common themes arising from our trust-level investigations and where appropriate these themes will be put forward for investigation in the National Programme. More information about our maternity investigations is available on our **website**.

### National investigations

Our national investigations can encompass any patient safety concern that occurred within NHS-funded care in England after 1 April 2017. We consider potential incidents or issues for investigation based on wide sources of information including that provided by healthcare organisations and our own research and analysis of NHS patient safety systems.

We decide what to investigate based on the scale of risk and harm, the impact on individuals involved and on public confidence in the healthcare system, and the learning potential to prevent future harm. We welcome

information about patient safety concerns from the public, but we do not replace local investigations and cannot investigate on behalf of families, staff, organisations or regulators.

Our investigation reports identify opportunities for relevant organisations with power to make appropriate improvements.

More information about our national investigations including in-depth explanations of our criteria, how we investigate, and how to refer a patient safety concern is available on our **website**.



# Executive Summary

This national intelligence report provides insight into a current safety risk that the Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch (HSIB) has identified.

**Background:** A safety risk was identified based on a referral to HSIB in April 2020 by a member of the public. The referral highlighted confusion around personal protective equipment (PPE) use requirements when visiting a patient at home who was in the 'clinically extremely vulnerable' category. The referral stated that some care workers did not use PPE when visiting their home during the Covid-19 response.

**Purpose:** This report documents how concerns raised by HSIB were responded to by Public Health England, the body responsible for the development of guidelines for the appropriate use of PPE.

**Outcome:** There are multiple Covid-19 guidelines for different care sectors.

PPE guidelines should be used in conjunction with other guidelines, such as infection control guidelines, so that care providers can develop protocols for care delivery. This is challenging when guidelines are updated, or new guidelines are issued. There is a risk that guidance may be missed.

## HSIB notes the following safety action

### Safety action A/2020/033:

On 13 May 2020, Public Health England withdrew the primary guidance for Covid-19 homecare provision and instead provided a link to the newer guidance on how to work safely in domiciliary care in England. This newer guidance included the personal protective equipment provisions needed when visiting people in the 'clinically extremely vulnerable' group, which were previously absent in the primary guidance for Covid-19 homecare provision.

## Healthcare system goal

Reducing the risk of Covid-19 transmission when care workers deliver care in people's homes (known as homecare or domiciliary care).

### Safety risk

Each care sector requires specific PPE guidelines due to the wide range of scenarios in which PPE is used. As evidence emerges, it is important that any new considerations are incorporated into guidance that has already been issued. There is a risk that service providers will operate on the basis of older guidelines and might be unaware of newer considerations.

### Details of referral

HSIB received a referral from a member of the public. The referral highlighted concerns about the use of PPE by care workers when visiting a patient at home who was in the 'clinically extremely vulnerable' category. In the reported case, district nurses used PPE when delivering homecare. However, other care workers did not use PPE and had been told this was not necessary. The patient later died, and their death was confirmed as being Covid-19 related. The care visits occurred when the patient and other household member were not showing any Covid-19 symptoms.

### Criteria evaluation

All safety risks that HSIB considers for investigation are evaluated against our national investigation criteria. The need for a rapid safety action was identified.

### Systemic risk – How widespread and how common is the safety issue across the healthcare system?

There are multiple Covid-19 guidelines for different care sectors. PPE guidelines should be used in conjunction with other guidelines, such as infection control guidelines, so that care providers can develop protocols for care delivery. This is challenging when guidelines are updated, or new guidelines are issued. There is a risk that guidance on patient safety issues may be missed.

Barriers to implementing national guidelines have been reported in academic literature, and tools have been developed to facilitate implementation efforts (Flodgren et al., 2016). However, when responding to a crisis scenario where the evidence base is being rapidly developed, there is a more fundamental challenge of ensuring that guidance is kept updated and easily accessible. While it is desirable to have a central repository, for example the gov.uk website, problems can still occur. This is an emerging safety risk.

### Outcome impact – What impact does the safety issue have on people and services across the healthcare system?

Having easy access to clear, current guidance on PPE in a pandemic will increase the likelihood of staff making correct decisions regarding infection control and therefore potentially reduce the likelihood of transmission of infection between health/social care staff and patients.

## Learning potential – What is the potential to drive positive change and improve patient safety?

There is an opportunity to introduce a document management system for guidelines to ensure that the latest information is available. This would involve the design of a usable navigation system so that all related guidelines relevant to a particular care sector are visible and can be checked for completeness.

### Public Health England's Covid-19 PPE guidance for care workers delivering homecare

The primary Covid-19 guidance for homecare provision was issued on 6 April 2020 by Public Health England via the gov.uk website (Public Health England, 2020a). This guide was aimed at local authorities, clinical commissioning groups and registered providers, who support and deliver care to people in their own homes, including community health services.

This guideline included the following 'what to do if...' scenarios:

- if the care worker is concerned they have Covid-19
- if the individual being cared for has symptoms of Covid-19
- if the individual being cared for does not have symptoms but is part of an isolating household
- if neither the individual nor the care worker have symptoms of Covid-19.

Within the 6 April 2020 guidance, there was no consideration of the PPE needed when caring for individuals within the 'clinically extremely vulnerable' group.

The joint official guidance issued on 2 April 2020 by Public Health England, Department of Health and Social Care, Public Health Wales, Public Health Agency Northern Ireland, Health Protection Scotland, and NHS England and NHS Improvement (2020b), relating to PPE requirements for homecare, included the provisions needed for people in the 'clinically extremely vulnerable' group. The primary guidance for Covid-19 homecare provision did not include this information. There was no straightforward way of navigating the **gov.uk website**. The guidance was not visible.

On 27 April 2020 Public Health England issued guidance on how to work safely in domiciliary care in England (Public Health England, 2020c). This guidance included the PPE provisions needed for people in the 'clinically extremely vulnerable' group. Again, the older primary guidance for Covid-19 homecare provision was not updated with this information and was still live on the **gov.uk website**.

### Response to HSIB's concerns

On 28 April 2020 HSIB brought the referral and associated safety risk to the attention of Public Health England.

## HSIB notes the following safety action

### **Safety action A/2020/033:**

On 13 May 2020, Public Health England withdrew the primary guidance for Covid-19 homecare provision and instead provided a link to the newer guidance on how to work safely in domiciliary care in England. This newer guidance included the personal protective equipment provisions needed when visiting people in the 'clinically extremely vulnerable' group, which were previously absent in the primary guidance for Covid-19 homecare provision.

## Appendix

Title of guidance	Location on gov.uk	Updates
Covid-19: guidance on home care provision.	<p>Home -&gt; Health and social care -&gt; Social care -&gt; Carers' health -&gt; Covid-19: guidance for supported living and home care.</p> <p>There are other guidelines relevant to providing homecare that are not linked to this guidance and cannot be easily navigated to as they exist in the Public health section of the <b>gov.uk website</b>.</p>	<p>Last updated on 6 April 2020.</p> <p>Withdrawn on 13 May 2020.</p>
Recommended PPE for primary, outpatient, community and social care by setting, NHS and independent sector.	<p>Home -&gt; Health and social care -&gt; Public health -&gt; Health protection -&gt; Infectious diseases.</p> <p>Although this document provides specific advice relevant to different care sectors, it is not linked to those sectors, some of which exist in the Social care section of the <b>gov.uk website</b>.</p>	<p>Issued on 2 April 2020. Document is not dated (no version control history).</p>
Covid-19: how to work safely in domiciliary care in England.	<p>Home -&gt; Health and social care -&gt; Public health -&gt; Health protection -&gt; Infectious diseases.</p> <p>Although this domiciliary care guideline is in the same section as the recommended PPE guideline there are no navigation links and within the infectious diseases section there are another 526 documents.</p> <p>There is also ambiguity caused by the seemingly interchangeable use of the terms homecare and domiciliary care.</p>	<p>Issued on 27 April 2020.</p>

## References

Flodgren, G., Hall, A. M., Goulding, L., Eccles, M. P., Grimshaw, J. M., Leng, G. C., Shepperd, S. (2016) Tools developed and disseminated by guideline producers to promote the uptake of their guidelines, Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, issue 8, article no. CD010669.

Public Health England. (2020a) Covid-19: guidance on home care provision [Online]. Available at: **<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-residential-care-supported-living-and-home-care-guidance/covid-19-guidance-on-home-care-provision>**

Public Health England, et al. (2020b) Recommended PPE for primary, outpatient, community and social care by setting, NHS and independent sector [Online]. Available at: **[https://www.cas.mhra.gov.uk/ViewandAcknowledgment/ViewAttachment.aspx?Attachment\\_id=103511](https://www.cas.mhra.gov.uk/ViewandAcknowledgment/ViewAttachment.aspx?Attachment_id=103511)**

(This guidance was issued jointly by the Department of Health and Social Care, Public Health Wales, Public Health Agency Northern Ireland, Health Protection Scotland, Public Health England, NHS England and NHS Improvement as official guidance).


Public Health England. (2020c) Covid-19: how to work safely in domiciliary care in England [Online]. Available at: **<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-how-to-work-safely-in-domiciliary-care>**



# Further information

More information about HSIB – including its team, investigations and history – is available at [www.hsib.org.uk](http://www.hsib.org.uk)

If you would like to request an investigation then please read our **guidance** before submitting a safety awareness form.

 @hsib\_org is our Twitter handle. We use this feed to raise awareness of our work and to direct followers to our publications, news and events.

## Contact us

If you would like a response to a query or concern please contact us via email using [enquiries@hsib.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@hsib.org.uk)

We monitor this inbox during normal office hours - Monday to Fridays (not bank holidays) from 0900hrs to 1700hrs. We aim to respond to enquiries within five working days.

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