



The impact of the COVID-19 virus on the PPE market

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As a result of the current global health crisis caused by the COVID-19 virus, the demand for certain types of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) has increased significantly. This has a profound impact on the availability of PPE for workforces. The situation has been exacerbated by individual countries applying restrictions on the free movement of PPE.

Why is there a problem with the supply of the suitable PPE?

Demand for PPE (and some types of medical devices, such as medical masks), as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, has multiplied. People that are not at obvious risk of infection (or that are not infected) are wearing masks; both private and governmental organisations try building up their stocks, thus creating a demand that is much higher than it should be.

On the supply side, an important part of the global production capacity is in China, which has been blocking export of these products to be able to fulfil the domestic needs.

Recently also other countries (including EU Member states) are taking decisions to limit the trade in specific types of PPE (masks, gloves, eye protection, clothing), which might help (at least short term) for their own market, but creates issues for other markets and longer term even for their own market. Since manufacturing and/or distribution of e.g. masks is highly concentrated in Europe, immediate effect in the availability of these products across Europe is eminent.

The high demand for these types of PPE means also that the availability of PPE for those that are using them in their day-to-day work in industry is limited or even completely non-existent. So, for those industrial workers, either there is no protection available or they have to use other types of protection (if there are alternatives). This will require interrogating their risk assessment, revisiting their hazard control policies and specifying adequate and suitable alternatives and re-sourcing PPE and the retraining of the individuals, which all is impossible overnight.

The other alternative is to stop the production in industry through lack of suitable PPE or alternative control measures. This only creates even more economic problems for the global community.

What should be done to ensure availability of the suitable PPE (and medical devices) ?

There is no sense in feeding the panic reaction of citizens and authorities. Only those people who really need to wear PPE (or medical devices) to protect themselves or others in their environment should wear them. And they need to be trained in the correct use of the PPE so that the effectiveness is guaranteed. It is quite clear that we are seeing pictures of individuals wearing tight fitting face masks with facial hair or wearing masks upside down, which means leakage at the seal is created and thus protection is non effective. If there is no training, there is no point in wasting good PPE for non-protection.

The normal functioning of the global / EU market must be restored. Limits on trading of PPE and medical devices that are not relevant for the COVID-19 crisis must be stopped immediately. Also limits on trading of PPE and medical devices relevant for the COVID-19 virus must be limited to making sure that the health workers have access to the products (e.g. preventing hoarding of PPE/medical devices by consumers or companies). Real solidarity between countries (and companies / health services) must be set up so that those who really need the PPE have access to them. ESF condemns any national restrictions on trade of PPE and/or medical supplies as these are counterproductive and will put peoples' safety and lives in danger. Therefore, a call for action by the European Union (the EU Commission) to urge Member States to stop these regulatory restrictions in order to respect the single EU market and free movement of goods.

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On behalf of the members