

Mrs Michelle O'Neill  
Deputy First Minister  
Northern Ireland Assembly  
Parliament Buildings  
Ballymiscaw  
Stormont  
Belfast  
BT4 3XX

27<sup>th</sup> May 2020

Dear Deputy First Minister,

### **Open letter to the minister responsible for equalities**

The PDA Union (Pharmacists' Defence Association) represents over 31,000 pharmacists and pharmacy students working across the UK in all sectors of healthcare. As far as the war on the Coronavirus is concerned, our members are on the front line in hospitals, community pharmacies, prisons and primary care. Whilst all our members face high risks, we are writing to you to address the situation regarding Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people, particularly healthcare workers. BAME pharmacists make up approximately 46% of the UK pharmacist workforce and in the last few weeks, three of our members having previously occupied front-line roles have lost their lives to this awful disease; all of them were from BAME backgrounds.

Since early April it has been evident that COVID-19 does not affect all equally. The disproportionate risk for people of BAME backgrounds was confirmed by the ONS on the 7<sup>th</sup> of May yet there has been little response from the government to investigate and lessen the potential repercussions of this through providing clear guidance for health care workers.

The ONS data found that black men and women, for instance, are 4.2 and 4.3 times more likely to die from a coronavirus related death than men and women of white ethnicity. Men in the Bangladeshi and Pakistani ethnic group were 1.8 times more likely than white men, and women, 1.6 times more likely again when considering the same socio-demographic characteristics and levels of health and disability.

You can read more about this on our website: <https://www.the-pda.org/pda-urge-the-government-and-nhs-to-protect-the-bame-community-and-include-pharmacy-in-plans-to-keep-workers-safe/>

The PDA is calling for the proper steps to be taken to mitigate the risk to BAME pharmacists and other health care workers; but first we need to understand the causes of these differences. This is important for this group, their families, and patients across the UK. The current advice for employers to "risk assess" staff and "make appropriate arrangements accordingly" lacks clarity, particularly considering the unacceptable PPE shortages some staff are still facing. We need better guidance and support from the government to ensure high-risk BAME workers are better protected.

The PDA would also like to reiterate the key worker status of all pharmacists and remind the government to include these workers in any plans made to protect health care staff. In a recent survey by *Pharmacy Magazine*, community pharmacists reported feeling let down by the government and treated as unessential which is unacceptable considering the public facing role played by these workers in community pharmacies, hospitals, care homes and wider communities. Their efforts to care for the people of the United Kingdom must not be left unsupported and unrecognised by the government, and the BAME community must not be left alone to suffer disproportionately during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We need an independent inquiry to understand why the BAME community is disproportionately impacted, whether the substantially higher levels of BAME deaths could have been prevented, and to generate more understanding so as to better protect frontline health-care staff at higher-risk. We look forward to receiving your response and being able to reassure our members that the Government is listening and acting on their concerns.  
Yours sincerely

Mark Koziol MRPharmS  
Chairman