

COVID-19: Who's Protecting those who Protects Us?

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The safety mask shortages are being made worse by anxious civilians hoarding medical supplies



The highly contagious coronavirus infection extended its imprint to 200 cases in India on Friday. The rapidly increasing numbers have prompted the Centre to widen critical restrictions by banning travel from the European Union, UK and Turkey and restriction on export of Masks.

With the rapidly growing number of positive infected coronavirus cases in India, one of the major challenges the country is needlessly facing are avoidable shortage of safety masks made worse by anxious civilians hoarding medical supplies though these are not prescribed for healthy individuals.

Public is panicking and hoarding up masks and other equipment, leaving limited supplies for health care professionals who need the gear the most. We are creating an avoidable supply chain diversion from supplies to Healthcare workers who are at greater coronavirus risk. Who will protect those who protect us?" Rajiv Nath, Forum Coordinator, AiMeD.

"Our Members are ramping up capacity utilization with assistance of Govt. to address raw material bottlenecks of alcohol, non-woven material and assure availability but appeal to consumers not to buy needlessly and hoard products." Added Mr. Nath.

Mr. Rajiv Nath appreciated the measures taken by Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution to prevent the spread of Covid-19 by issuing immediate directives to State Govt /UT Administrations to quickly ensure availability of alcohol without quotas to enable them to rapidly enhance production of hand sanitizers and ensure its availability to the consumers.

He said that the action taken to once again curb exports is understandable as some manufacturer were exporting more than 25% of their capacity.

In the wake of such shortage the Govt has restricted exports of masks and health ministry also issued a fresh set of guidelines on wearing the masks, one of the most sought-after commodities at this time. According to the guideline, everyone need not wear a mask and proper hand washing is effective alternate to sanitizers.

WHO advises rational use of medical masks to avoid unnecessary wastage of precious resources and misuse of masks. Healthy people don't need to wear masks. Use a mask only if you have a suspected Covid-19 infection with mild respiratory

symptoms (coughing or sneezing) or you caring for someone with suspected Covid-19 infection. A suspected Covid-19 infection is linked to travel in areas where cases have been reported, or close contact with someone who has travelled in these areas and has become ill.

Another critical issue is with demand rising more than 10 times due to non-prescribed use of masks by Public, the country is not only witnessing surge in prices of medical masks and hand sanitizer but the domestic market is now flooded with sub-standard and low-quality products as some retailers and unorganised mask manufacturers and unlicensed sanitizer manufacturers are cashing in on the virus terror.

Concerned with the huge surge in prices over recent weeks, AiMeD (Association of Indian Medical Device Industry) & PWMAI (Preventive Wear Manufacturer Association of India) representing interest of over 700 medical device manufacturers had sought intervention of Govt., Drug Prices Regulator, NPPA, in capping prices, and ensuring quality, both with ramifications on consumers, health workers and industry.

Dr. Sanjiv Relhan, Chairman, PWMAI said, "The government has thankfully quickly taken some much needed drastic and bold steps to curb the unethical behavior in the market by bringing Gloves, Masks & Sanitizers under Essential Commodities Act and the Disaster Management Act, but lot needs to be done by all of us – Manufacturers, Traders & Consumers to address the challenge of avoiding shortage of masks for the healthcare professionals and of Sanitizer to the Consumers and ensure availability at reasonable prices and quality products to jointly fight Corona Virus."

It has been noticed that many of the PPE & Medical Masks being sold in India are not manufactured under prescribed hygienic conditions and also do not comply with Basic Standards of PPE as recommended by WHO. This scenario may lead to number of Healthcare Workers possibly getting infected as they may attend the patients with a false sense of security that they are equipped with PPE and hence will be casual in taking precautions.