

March 20, 2020

Sent by email: minhsal@leg.gov.mb.ca

Hon. Cameron Friesen, MLA
Minister of Health, Seniors & Active Living
Room 302, Legislative Building
450 Broadway, Winnipeg, MB | R3C 3L6

OPEN LETTER RE: International Travel Isolation Policy Not Applying to Health Care Workers

Dear Minister Friesen,

On behalf of 12,000 nurses across the province, I am writing to express serious concerns about Shared Health's decision to not apply the 14-day isolation policy for international travelers who are essential health care providers.

Currently your government is advising all Manitobans returning from international travel to self-isolate for 14 days immediately after returning from any international destination, including the United States. This is the right decision, and consistent with guidance from the Public Health Agency of Canada and evidence-based practices. However, the decision to forego this requirement for health care providers is causing confusion and concern among many nurses due to the serious implications for workplace health and safety and the potential spread of the virus. According to the Manager's companion document to the Guidelines for Screening of Manitoba Health Care Workers, produced by Shared Health on March 17:

"All other health care workers [returning from international travel] who are asymptomatic are directed to contact their manager. The manager will determine if the healthcare worker's specific position in the department is "operationally required" in the department."

I know we agree that our collective efforts must be focused on 'flattening the curve' to slow the impact of COVID-19 on our health care system and Manitoba patients. But by forcing care providers to report to work following return from international travel, and leaving it to each manager's discretion whether to apply the self-isolation policy to any given case, you are increasing the risk of transmission of COVID-19 in our health care facilities and communities.

Failure to reverse this decision could have serious implications for nurse staffing levels if transmission increases among staff due to possible undetected cases. MNU has been speaking out for many years about the nursing shortage, and we have legitimate concerns about system capacity. With an escalating number of COVID-19 cases expected in the coming weeks, the only way our health care system will be able to keep up is by ensuring the health and safety of all care providers.

The Government of Ontario has already taken action by reversing this misguided policy in their province. Here in Manitoba, we must also ensure a consistent and evidence-based approach to protect the health and safety of care providers, so they can stand ready to respond to the crisis.

For the safety of all Manitobans, we call on your government to immediately reverse this decision and respect the 14-day self-isolation period for health care providers. Further, given the hardship many will face due to the unprecedented severity of this situation, we believe the government should provide paid leave to any Manitoba worker required to self-isolate.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Darlene Jackson
President
Manitoba Nurses Union