Background information on the shortage of gowns

Over the past week, trust leaders have raised concerns about shortages of clinical gowns which are required protection for staff undertaking higher risk procedures. The situation is now critical. This short briefing aims to explain the shortage and reflect on the urgent need for a resolution.

Why has the shortage arisen?

This shortage has arisen in part because the pre-existing national PPE strategic stock reserve did not include large amounts of the highest protection level clinical gowns. Despite trusts following PHE guidance on the use of gowns, we understand that there is demand for around 80,000 a day in England during the pandemic. Additionally, the UK does not have a high-volume industry manufacturing clinical gowns and other smaller manufacturing countries have placed export bans on gowns. Given that gowns have to meet a high technical specification and require specialised fluid-repellent treatment and textiles, this shortage has been more difficult to address than others (e.g. visors which can be made by 3D printers).

This leaves China as the only immediate source of high-volume quantities of gowns, and so there is massive global competition for gowns all concentrated on China. National NHS leaders started buying stocks from China many weeks ago but the delivery has been erratic despite daily freight flights. This is partly because China delayed consignments to conduct local testing before releasing stocks, but other issues include stock mislabelled as gowns but containing masks, and stock needing to meet stringent safety tests on arrival in the UK with no guarantee that these will be passed. National leaders, working closely with the FCO and DIT, have worked hard to overcome these constraints. But the reality is that, for some trusts, stocks of gowns have started to run critically low and the new supply is not yet flowing consistently and reliably. The UK has therefore been bridging the gap between existing reserves and stocks ordered after the start of the pandemic that have not yet arrived.

What are national NHS leaders, and trust leaders doing?

National, regional and NHS trust leaders have been working extremely hard to address these shortages. The remaining national reserve stock of gowns has been carefully allocated in the past few days to those most in need via a series of emergency deliveries. For some, this was literally ‘just in time.’ PHE has now approved the use of coveralls in place of gowns and a consignment of 200,000 was released earlier this week. Northern Ireland also shared 250,000 gowns on 15 April. Trusts have been working hard to share stock with neighbouring providers wherever possible, with this mutual aid a key benefit of being in a National Health Service. Other organisations with gowns supplies have also stepped into the breach including councils, police forces, dentists, vets and water companies. But despite these actions, it now looks increasingly likely that additional stock due to arrive today will not be delivered in time and in the right quantities for every trust. The time will come for a public inquiry into the government’s handling of PPE, including gowns, but given the urgency of the immediate
challenges facing national NHS and trust leaders, it is most important we focus on today’s reality and work collectively to ensure frontline staff have sufficient alternative equipment to treat patients safely.