



April 3, 2020  
For Immediate Release

## **MNU and MAHCP Joint Statement: A Reply to Health Minister Cameron Friesen**

Manitobans are relying on health care now more than ever. Nurses, allied health professionals and other health care workers across the province are putting their own safety at risk to make sure Manitobans continue to get the health care they need and deserve during this pandemic. In return, they deserve to be protected and supported.

Efforts to protect staff with adequate Personal Protective Equipment and other measures have been patchwork, slow to implement and inconsistently applied. As a result, our members do not feel safe.

Last week, COVID-19 testing was opened up to front-line health care workers. As soon as test results were available, we began to see positive cases among MNU and MAHCP members. The risk to front-line health care staff is very real, and more and more of our members are testing positive or being told to stay home and self-isolate due to exposure to positive patients.

MNU and MAHCP have been calling for better protections for front-line staff for weeks. Yesterday, we received a response from Health Minister Cameron Friesen that places the blame for recent outbreaks at Winnipeg hospitals squarely on the shoulders of the very front-line health care workers who are putting themselves at risk to deliver care. This false and diversionary tactic by the Health Minister is shameful. The full letter from the minister is attached to this statement. Here is an excerpt:

*Since January, Manitoba's chief provincial public health officer (CPPHO) and I have been urging all Manitobans, and in particular health care workers, to stay home if they are not feeling well. A health care worker showing up to the workplace with any type of*

*symptoms presents a risk not only to patients but to coworkers as well. Unfortunately, over the past days we have learned of examples where this direction has not been followed, and many healthcare workers have now been instructed to self-isolate for 14-days as a consequence.*

In this time of crisis, rather than blaming health care workers, the Health Minister should follow the lead of other jurisdictions and make sure they're supported and protected. He must ensure that health care staff sent home to self-isolate are provided paid leave, rather than force them to use their own sick time or vacation. He must ensure that presumptive workers compensation coverage is provided for those who test positive. And he must ensure that nurses, allied health and all health care workers are protected to the highest possible standard while on the job serving Manitobans. This means following the precautionary principle which was established in the aftermath of the SARS epidemic.

Our members were already feeling undervalued, under-supported and stretched before this crisis hit. In recent years, they have experienced rounds of cuts, closures and consolidations that have left them and our health care system reeling. They will continue to show up and put themselves at risk to serve Manitobans, but they are urgently waiting for this government to step up and support them. We stand ready to work with the government and health officials, and we urge them to listen to front-line workers.

*"The point is not who is right and who is wrong about airborne transmission. The point is not science but safety. Scientific knowledge changes constantly. Yesterday's scientific dogma is today's discarded fable. When it comes to worker safety in hospitals, we should not be driven by the scientific dogma of yesterday or even the scientific dogma of today. We should be driven by the precautionary principle that reasonable steps to reduce risk should not await scientific certainty. Until this precautionary principle is fully recognized, mandated and enforced... workers will continue to be at risk."*

*—Justice Campbell, Chair of the SARS Commission*