

The Rt Hon Matthew Hancock MP
Department of Health & Social Care
Ministerial Correspondence and Public Enquiries Unit
39 Victoria Street
London
SW1H 0EU

6 November 2020

Dear Minister,

We are writing to express our concerns regarding the new shielding guidance that has been issued to clinically extremely vulnerable patients for the November COVID-19 related lockdown.

As you will know, a significant proportion of the UK's blood cancer patient community will be classed as clinically extremely vulnerable to COVID-19, due to the immune-suppressive impact of their disease or treatment. It is therefore imperative that protective measures asked of these patients are clear, and offer them full support, to minimise impact on their physical, mental and economic well-being. We would therefore like to raise the following points:


1. We understand that the Government intends to write to all those who will be asked to follow new guidance. We urge the Government to do this quickly and comprehensively. During the previous lockdown, many blood cancer patients had to wait weeks for letters from the Government identifying them as shielding and explaining advice. This led to a significant degree of confusion, and also difficulty in clinically extremely vulnerable patients proving to their employers that they needed to work at home or be furloughed. Those required to follow shielding advice must receive these letters as a matter of urgency for this lockdown to avoid these problems arising again. In addition, we would also like clarification that all those newly diagnosed since the previous lockdown have been added to the list of those who are clinically extremely vulnerable and will receive their letters promptly.
2. The latest shielding guidance and Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme guidance puts the responsibility on employers for deciding whether staff can be furloughed onto the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme if they cannot work from home. We believe this has the potential to lead to distressing negotiations between blood cancer patients and their employers, with some patients potentially being in a situation where they are made to feel they have to decide between protecting their health or their income. It should be made absolutely clear in the guidance that any clinically extremely vulnerable patient has the automatic right to be furloughed if they cannot work from home and in accordance with shielding guidance. We urge a change to both shielding and furlough scheme guidance to state that clinically extremely vulnerable patients should be put on furlough if the patient cannot work without being in breach of their shielding guidance.

3. We are very concerned that in order to be eligible for support under the Self-employed Income Support Scheme, individuals must declare 'reduced demand' for their services. Reports suggest that the clinically extremely vulnerable patients who are unable to carry out self-employed work due to the need to shield will no longer be eligible for any support. We have written to the Chancellor to request urgent clarification, and confirmation that the shielding self-employed will be able to access income support during his lock down, but would also like to raise with you the extreme anxiety this will cause to self-employed blood cancer patients.
4. We are also very concerned that the food parcel service that was available to those shielding during the previous lockdown does not appear to be available this time around to those that need it. While it is welcome that these patients will be able to access priority supermarket and pharmacy delivery slots, it should be noted that not all patients have the ability to book or arrange these. We would like to ask what is being done by the Government to ensure all those being asked to shield can access basic food and medical supplies during this new lockdown?
5. The new guidance also fails to advise clinically extremely vulnerable patients as to what measures they should take if they live with school-aged children, or adults who are leaving the home for work. The guidance that clinically extremely vulnerable patients should remain 2m apart from others in their household is impractical for those living in normal-sized or smaller-sized homes. This is already leading to confusion and anxiety among the blood cancer patient community. We would appreciate any insight as to what impact assessment has been done for clinically extremely vulnerable patients in this situation.

Many of our member charities provide direct support and are answering queries from blood cancer patients and their families regarding this unclear guidance.

We would of course be happy to meet to talk through our concerns about the new shielding guidance and request an urgent response to clarify these matters.

Yours sincerely,



Zack Pemberton-Whiteley

Chair

Blood Cancer Alliance

On behalf of: ACLT, Anthony Nolan, Blood Cancer UK, CLL Support, CML Support, DKMS, Leukaemia Care, Leukaemia and Lymphoma Northern Ireland, Leukaemia Cancer Society, Leukaemia UK, Lymphoma Action, MDS UK, Myeloma UK, Race Against Blood Cancer and WMUK.

CC. Cally Palmer and Professor Peter Johnson, NHS England.