

Robin Swann MLA
Minister of Health
Department of Health
Castle Buildings
Stormont
Belfast
BT4 3SQ

2 November 2020

Dear Mr Swann,

Older people and COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on older people: 90% of COVID-19 deaths in the first wave of the pandemic were in people aged over 65. Around half of COVID-19 deaths in Northern Ireland occurred in a care home, emphasising the impact that COVID-19 has had on that sector.

It is now certain that a second wave of the pandemic is fast approaching, with numbers of positive cases rising daily. Although more is now known about the virus, including how it affects older people and how it can be treated, we must ensure that the terrible experiences of older people during the first wave are not repeated. The urgent priority must be to apply learning from this first wave. Therefore, we urge the Government and NHS and care organisations in all parts of the country to consider the following critical issues:

- **Policy decisions and allocation of resources must be made on the basis of evidence and need, not age.** Older people are not a homogenous group – some people aged over 65 will be very active and independent and others will be living with long-term conditions, including frailty syndromes. It is also important to remember that while the majority of deaths from COVID-19 have been in the older age group, most older people who contract the virus will recover. Older people have as much right to appropriate treatment as any other member of society, and we urge the government to guard against ageism in its allocation of resources.

- **Address pent-up demand for NHS and social care services.** During the pandemic many elective procedures, outpatient consultations and social supports were cancelled, having a devastating impact on those who benefit from them. The NHS is now working hard to restart these services. While we appreciate that services such as cancer diagnosis and treatment will, and should, be prioritised, we urge the prompt restarting of no less vital services such as falls prevention and community rehabilitation and support services. These services help older people and their carers to stay healthy at home, reducing demand on emergency services and releasing hospital and care home capacity.
- **Care homes must be supported.** Care homes were left unprotected, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic, with devastating results. Care homes must have equitable access to PPE and to regular testing, and prompt results, for residents and staff. Homes must also be supported to set up effective isolation facilities for residents with symptoms or confirmed COVID-19. Given the detrimental effect on quality of life for care home residents through not being able to see their loved ones, care homes must be supported to enable safe visiting. This Government has committed several times to a sustainable solution to the crisis in social care and the pandemic has highlighted that urgent and meaningful action in this area is now critical.
- **Acknowledge the harm to physical and mental health caused by lockdown.** The BGS believes that for many older people, lockdown poses almost as much threat as COVID-19. Older people have spent months inside, not participating in their usual activities and being far less active than they normally are. This is particularly the case for older people who have cognitive impairments and may find it difficult to understand why they are restricted or why they need to take precautions. Many older people are likely to have experienced physical deconditioning as a result, leaving them more susceptible to other illnesses, falls and hospitalisation. Investment in exercise and rehabilitation services is crucial to ensuring that the long-term impact of COVID on older people is minimised.
- **Recognise the work of NHS and social care staff.** The first wave of the pandemic saw an outpouring of public appreciation for those who work in health and social care. It is important that this public appreciation is followed by concrete recognition for staff including addressing the low numbers of trainees in geriatric medicine, increasing district nursing and advanced practitioner capacity, and taking steps to ensure that working in social care and care homes is

seen as an attractive career choice and is remunerated on a scale commensurate with those working in the NHS.

- **Ensure that past gains are not lost.** In recent years, there has been significant progress in the care of older people, particularly regarding direct access to older people's services in hospital which improved services for older people needing hospital care by reducing duplication, handovers and potential delays accessing a specialist. During the pandemic some of these direct access services in Belfast have been stopped to make way for Nightingale services. This has had a detrimental impact on the older people they normally serve and it is important that these services are reinstated as soon as possible.

The BGS believes that these are crucial areas for the Northern Ireland Assembly to focus on to ensure that older people are not disproportionately affected by the second wave of the pandemic and its associated restrictions. We urge you to call upon the expertise available through the British Geriatrics Society, to ensure older people's needs are not marginalised as they were during the first wave of the pandemic. We have over 4300 members, including around 130 in Northern Ireland, who are highly-experienced in the specialist care of older people in acute, primary and community settings. Please call upon this resource to ensure the best possible outcomes for older people as we navigate through the next stage of this pandemic. Ensuring that older people have the care and support that they need, when and where they need it will help to minimise COVID-19 related harms for this population group and will strengthen the resilience of the whole health and care system.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this with you further. To arrange this, please contact our Policy Manager, Sally Greenbrook, at s.greenbrook@bgs.org.uk.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Tahir Masud
President

Dr Jennifer Burns
President Elect

Dr Mark Roberts
Chair, Northern Ireland Council