BOHS Member Information on Manufacture, Use and Distribution of Face Masks in non-Healthcare settings

BOHS is seeing increasing enquiries about the use of face masks by the general public, including the use, manufacture and distribution of independently designed of “DIY” masks as a measure against COVID-19.

Public Health England have today (07/04/202) up-dated guidance for employers and businesses recommending against the use of face masks in non-care settings. As we understand it, this is based on the balance between the preventative/protective potential of non-clinical masks and the other potential hygiene implications of improper use and maintenance.

If there is a public demand for devices, it may be that employers and employees feel that despite PHE’s recommendations, non-clinical face masks are needed. There are some points to take into account when deciding to proceed with manufacturing, procurement and use in different contexts. This is not official advice, but provides some considerations which we think are important:

1. Employers should be aware that the impact of non-specialist devices in protecting workers from inhaled infection is low (30% effectiveness is a positive estimate). The risks involved in reusable masks are possibly greater because of the potential to compromise hand hygiene, as indicated by PHE.

2. Where there is a difficulty with social distancing and there is risk of exposure to infected people in the workplace, then the approach taken might reasonably be the same standard as in the NHS guidance for PPE for in-home care, i.e. using Type IIR Standard FRSM, together with other PPE appropriate for the circumstances, based on a context-specific risk assessment and with effective and relevant training on use and maintenance.

3. Issuing masks on their own without training may render their use ineffective or even create more risk. Providing masks without adequate and effective guidance and training (relevant to the wearers level of understanding, language and capability) on use and the requirement for other measures may fail to meet a reasonable duty of care to employees.

4. It is dangerous to assume that face masks on their own will have an appreciable effect on infection rates or that any materials can be used with equal safety to produce masks without there being other unintended consequences for health.

5. Any business considering manufacturing new RPE products might want to seek guidance from MHRA and also avail themselves of legal advice.
For further guidance and information on the use of PPE and COVID-19, please contact kevin.bampton@bohs.org