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► To cite this version:

Marc Fadel, Jérôme Salomon, Alexis Descatha. Coronavirus outbreak: the role of companies in preparedness and responses. *Lancet Public Health*, 2020, 5 (4), pp.e193. 10.1016/S2468-2667(20)30051-7. hal-02495446

HAL Id: hal-02495446

<https://univ-angers.hal.science/hal-02495446>

Submitted on 2 Mar 2020

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Coronavirus outbreak: the role of companies in preparedness and responses

As in previous health crises, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak has raised questions about preparedness and emergency responses in many countries.

In this crisis, what role can companies play? Public and private companies must continue to produce or provide their services, but with consideration of the health context. Many companies are involved with the COVID-19 outbreak because they are established in or work with China (client or supplier), and most have already activated their business continuity planning or equivalent. During an infectious disease outbreak like COVID-19, most large companies around the world have a major part to play, especially in terms of preparedness and emergency response. Indeed, companies should be integrated into the governmental health contingency plan developed in many countries, and by WHO and the International Labor Organization.¹⁻³ Helped by their occupational practitioners, healthcare advisers, and safety professionals, companies that have a financial capacity and responsibilities (including governmental, federal, or state administrations) will thus have to prepare their business continuity planning for when cases of infected patients occur in the company. They also must be prepared for the potential psychosocial and psychological effects of outbreaks. All health professionals should be involved in the development and implementation of recommendations for companies and their environments.⁴

In practice, based on previous outbreak experiences and governmental contingency plans integrating workplaces as recommended by various organisations,¹⁻³ specific actions

should be taken. First, prevention of discrimination of Chinese workers is crucial, as potential fears could arise around possible infectious cases, whether confirmed or not. Second, teleworking should be encouraged and developed. Third, we recommend that companies implement a dedicated response with medical screening, surveillance, and care, including psychological support.⁵ Companies are responsible for provision of optimal prevention to protect the health of their employees during their work. Fourth, regular follow-up of workers can also be done using telemedicine by the occupational health service to reduce in-person contact. Fifth, training and information on the responsibility of each employee in prevention of disease should be provided by health practitioners, such as basic hygiene rules and mask use. Finally, specific support for returning to work should be implemented, including assessment for eligibility for employment injury benefit. These recommendations should be included in occupational risk assessment.

Companies are and will be an important piece of global management of any outbreaks, including COVID-19, through the crucial involvement of their occupational, health, and safety practitioners.

We declare no competing interests. JS and AD contributed equally.

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Lancet Public Health 2020

Published Online
February 28, 2020
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(20\)30051-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(20)30051-7)