

Coronavirus sweeps through Russian medical facilities

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Numerous medical facilities across Russia are under quarantine, as the coronavirus spreads among physicians, nurses and patients alike. A deficit of masks and personal protective equipment (PPE) in hospitals and clinics in Saint Petersburg, Moscow and other cities has caused health care workers to contract COVID-19 from those they are treating. Sick staff are now struggling to care for themselves, their colleagues and patients in institutions under lockdown. Coronavirus infections in Russia continue to rise unabated, with nearly 70,000 officially diagnosed, a seven-fold increase compared to two weeks ago.

At the Vreden Institute of Trauma and Orthopedics in Saint Petersburg, several hundred people have been in quarantine for half a month, with workers inside reporting that most are infected. Once the virus was detected at the facility, the staff decided who would remain to care for the patients and who would leave and place themselves under home quarantine. Despite attempts to wall off areas with plastic sheeting, medical workers who stayed were unable to effectively isolate coronavirus victims within the building. The institution turned into a hot spot.

Explaining his work treating patients despite himself being ill, one doctor told the news outlet *Meduza*, “What else were we to do? There was no choice.” Staff who have recovered and tested negative for COVID-19 are now returning to aid their colleagues.

At the Luberetsky regional hospital outside of Moscow, more than 50 medical workers in the neurology ward have gotten coronavirus. Similar numbers have been infected at the hospital in Zlatoust, a city of about 175,000 west of Chelyabinsk in Siberia. In Vladivostok, a city in Russia’s far east, 42 people at the local hospital have COVID-19, of whom 17 are employees. At an eye clinic in Krasnoyarsk, 89 people,

including 13 doctors, are sick.

The fact that medical facilities that are not directly involved in the treatment of coronavirus have become incubators of the disease is an indication of the absence of basic diagnostic and infection-control resources at these facilities.

Employees at the Luberetsky hospital are demanding an investigation of the institution’s administration, which they blame for causing the outbreak. Workers only received low-quality PPE a month after COVID-19 was detected there. “The suits are transparent, easily torn, the material is like cotton, 30 masks were given out; apparently we will have to wash them,” one physician told *Gazeta.ru*. He added, “We still have no respirators. We were given very little disinfectant, and it was explained that this would be until mid-June.”

The Kremlin has acknowledged that “some” regional governments are short on supplies but insists that regional health ministries must address the situation. In an effort to direct social anger away from the federal government, at a meeting with local officials this week, Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin declared that oblast representatives had not properly submitted their requests to a 33-billion-ruble fund intended to increase the supply of hospital beds, PPE, and ventilators. As a result, much of the fund went unused.

Even as Russia’s infections rise, the Kremlin’s health minister has declared the coronavirus situation to be “under control.” Different branches of the federal government have given conflicting indications of when the virus peak is supposed to hit—from early to mid-May. The quarantine measures currently in place throughout the country are expected to last until at least May 9.

In Moscow, movement is controlled through passes

that grant an individual permission to travel within the city for essential purposes. The initial result of the pass system was long lines that violated social distancing rules in the capital's metro stations, as police checked individuals' documents. Moscow mayor Sergei Sobyenin called this week for these measures to be extended throughout Russia.

As the closure of clinics and hospitals because of COVID-19 outbreaks causes a larger health crisis, economic hardships in Russia intensify. In addition to laying off workers, many companies keeping employees on the books are failing to pay them.

Official data put out by the Ministry of Labor claim that there have been just 44,000 layoffs since the start of the year, bringing the total number of unemployed workers in the country to 735,000. Rosstat, the federal statistical service, says that 3.4 million Russians are out of work, which puts the jobless rate at about 4.6 percent. The Ministry of Labor's data is based on unemployment filings, whereas Rosstat uses a survey to gather its information.

Economists, however, argue that both sets of data are a vast undercount. When broader standards are applied for calculating who is unemployed, the real number of people in need of work is about 4 million. The Institute for Economic Growth estimates that if the quarantine remains in place for another two to three months, a further 4.5 million people will be laid off. If it continues for another six months, the number will rise to 14 million.

When the Kremlin initiated the countrywide quarantine weeks ago, President Vladimir Putin declared that the month of April would be a "paid holiday" for Russia's workers. However, it issued no direct payments to the population and made no funds available to employers to offset their costs, such that most companies ignored the decree. By the middle of the month, the country's prime minister announced the creation of a 150-billion-ruble fund to support wage payments. However, it is widely understood that this is not enough to secure the incomes of millions affected by the crisis.

This week, the Sberbank head German Gref insisted that the Russian government could not give money directly to the population because, unlike elsewhere in the world, the country does not have a mechanism by which to do so. Meanwhile, banks are freezing credit

lines for consumers. Putin appealed to financial institutions on Thursday to not stop lending money to the population but outlined no concrete measures to address the situation.

Although there are widespread news reports of rising prices for basic consumer goods—such as sugar, eggs, buckwheat, potatoes, tomatoes, and lemons—the government said this week that it would not impose price controls. It insists that the collapsing value of the Russian ruble, which is trading at around 74 to the dollar, as compared to 60 to the dollar before the COVID-19 crisis hit, is driving up costs for producers. Limiting what they can charge customers for their products will drive them out of business, says the government.

The unprecedented fall in global oil prices is unleashing a massive revenue crisis for the Russian government. In order to comfortably meet its planned expenditures and avoid drawing on the National Welfare Fund (NWF), a multibillion-dollar emergency reserve, the country's main export needs to trade at around \$40 a barrel. Currently, that number stands at \$8 a barrel.

Demand for the commodity has cratered due to the pandemic, leading to a glut on the market. The deal recently reached between Russia and Saudi Arabia, after weeks of conflict over production levels, has failed to arrest the price drop. Russia's natural gas revenues are also falling.

Finance Minister Anton Siluanov reported that with a price of \$20 a barrel, the state will spend two trillion rubles a week from the NWF, draining the fund entirely by 2024, six to ten years earlier than anticipated. Ultimately, the state will have to respond with the imposition of severe austerity measures.

Social anger is building in Russia over the combined health and social crisis. On April 20, 1500 protesters gathered in Vladikavkaz, a city in north Ossetia, to demand government aid for those being left destitute by the crisis.



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