

High COVID-19 infection rates among doctors and nurses in Germany

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While measures against the dangerous COVID-19 pathogen are being increasingly relaxed, the numbers infected in hospitals and nursing homes is rising dramatically. According to the public health body Robert Koch Institute (RKI), more than 20,000 workers in German hospitals, doctors' practices, nursing homes and care services are now infected. This corresponds to about 11 percent of all infected persons. In the health sector, 894 workers had to be treated as inpatients and 60 have died from the consequences of the infection.

"Every day since mid-April, an average of more than 230 doctors and nurses were infected," the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported. At times, this professional group accounts for one in five reported cases. "Apparently, it is still not possible to protect those who work for the health of the elderly, the sick and those in need of care," the newspaper concludes.

The situation is similar in other countries. Surveys estimate that at least 200,000 doctors and nurses have been infected worldwide. The number of unreported cases is enormously high. There are hardly any countries with complete data.

As at the beginning of the crisis, the main reason for the rising number of infections is a lack of protective equipment. As reported by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, according to a recent survey conducted by the doctors' association Marburger Bund, 38 percent of those questioned still said that they lacked protective equipment. "Respiratory protection masks with fine particle filters (FFP2 and FFP3) are lacking, as are gowns, protective goggles, visors, gloves and even simple surgical masks."

Similar experiences are reported by the German Professional Association for Nursing. "Many institutions still report that FFP2 and FFP3 masks are in short supply," its spokeswoman Johanna Knüppel told the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

Another reason for the spread is the continuing lack of testing. According to the RKI, it has no data on the extent to which testing is carried out in hospitals and care homes. Since the beginning of the crisis, doctors' and patients' representatives have been demanding comprehensive tests, which are systematically carried out and recorded by professional groups. It is still the order of the day in clinics and nursing homes that potentially infected staff remain on duty until symptoms appear.

More and more health workers are outraged by these conditions, which have now been going on for months. In Brandenburg last week, nurses handed in over 3,500 signatures during a video conference with Ursula Nonnenmacher (Green Party), state Minister of Health for Brandenburg. The workers are demanding security and recognition of their work.

In Berlin, employees of the Charité university hospital and the state-owned Vivantes Clinics handed over thousands of letters to health senator (state minister) Dilek Kalayci (Social Democratic Party, SPD) on Wednesday. They demand more protection, protective equipment and disinfectants.

The action was organised by the trade union Verdi. However, the union has played a key role in supporting massive cuts in Berlin's health sector for two decades in close cooperation with the SPD-led senate (state executive) and is now seeking to cover its tracks by hypocritically expressing outrage at the disastrous consequences of the "savings measures."

Both Nonnenmacher and Federal Health Minister Jens Spahn (CDU), who know that they have nothing to fear from Verdi, met the workers' demands with their usual ignorance.

Spahn recently claimed that the situation regarding protective materials had "eased." Nonnenmacher passed the buck, saying that the procurement of materials was the responsibility of the clinics themselves.

The Green Party also made it equally clear that the state government, in which the Left Party is also a member, does not want to change the desolate staffing levels and the far too low wages in the nursing sector. It rejected placing a lower limit on staffing levels, as otherwise, clinics would have to be closed, adding cynically that it could “not mandate wages agreed by collective bargaining.”

All political parties are in favour of lifting the current ban on visiting clinics and nursing homes, although they know that these facilities are still hot spots.

While the pandemic continues to spread in clinics, slaughterhouses, parcel centres and other establishments, and a second wave is threatened due to the relaxation of the lockdown, advocates of further cuts to the health system are becoming increasingly open.

Reinhard Busse, who teaches health management at Berlin’s Technical University, explains in a guest article for Cicero that the coronavirus pandemic has exposed “the weak points of our hospitals.” By this, he does not mean the lack of protective equipment, respirators, intensive care beds or personnel. Rather, he advocates closing more clinics and reducing the number of beds. “We must not succumb to the fallacy that the number of beds is a sign of quality,” he claims.

He warns against measuring the quality of hospitals almost exclusively by the number of beds. “The discussion about hospital quality is in danger of being set back years and even becoming a victim of COVID-19.”

Busse is concerned that the pandemic means radical cutbacks in the health care system cannot continue unabated. In fact, it has become clear that the massive reduction in beds, personnel and hospital financing based on the introduction of so-called diagnosis-related flat-rate payments (DRG) has led to a situation that simply makes high-quality, safe care for all impossible. Instead, the profit interests of the large hospital operators are what dominates.

It is such interests that Busse also addresses when he complains that the Cartel Office has prohibited mergers between large hospitals. Under the slogan, “Fewer hospitals, more quality,” Busse summarizes the destructive goals of his campaign. Last year, he co-authored a Bertelsmann study calling for the closure of half of all existing hospitals in Germany.

The economist Boris Augurzyk of the RWI-Leibnitz Institute for Economic Research claimed as early as April that there were not too few, but too many hospitals in Germany. He seeks to exploit the crisis to further reduce

the number of hospitals and said he was “sad” not more clinics had been closed.

The federal Health Ministry is currently examining the effects of the so-called COVID-19 Hospital Relief Law. It has provided clinics with ridiculously small sums of money compared to the rescue package given to big business. As part of its review, the health ministry has established an advisory board to work out further proposals by the end of next month. In addition to representatives of the health insurance companies and clinics, Busse and Augurzyk are also represented on it.

The government and its “experts” are trying to use the pandemic to implement their anti-social agenda. In doing so, they are exploiting the fact that many hospitals now face economic difficulties because they are caring for coronavirus patients or are trying to maintain sufficient bed capacities.

The University Hospital of Dresden, for example, provided care for up to 20 COVID-19 patients and, at the same time, kept 240 beds free. According to its commercial director Marcus Polle, the first wave of the pandemic cost the hospital around €2 million. The lump sum of €560 per bed granted by the government was by far not enough to cover the gaps, he said.

To limit the economic consequences, many clinics are returning to “normality.” This could have dramatic consequences if the number of coronavirus cases increases again. RKI head Lothar Wieler assumes—“with great certainty”—there will be a second wave, the majority of scientists are sure of that he says. But instead of preparing hospitals for it and investing in the necessary beds, personnel and equipment, those who run the health sector will continue to focus on maximising profits.



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