# Baltimore's Mercy Medical Center intensive care unit head physician dies of COVID-19

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On Saturday, July 25, Dr. Joseph J. Costa, the head physician at the Mercy Medical Center in Baltimore, Maryland died of COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, the hospital announced. The *Washington Post* reported that Costa died surrounded by a vigil of about 20 members of his staff, along with his partner of 28 years, who placed their gloved hands on him as he passed. He was 56 years old.

David R. Hart, Costa's husband, who also fell ill with COVID-19, described him as the bravest man he ever knew. As the deadly pandemic spread, Costa, who had an underlying autoimmune disorder, continued to work on the front lines. Described as an "egalitarian person" by Hart, Costa had felt it was important to bear the same burdens and face the same risks as his staff. Before Costa fell ill in late June, the virus had already sickened another physician and several staff members. "I begged him not to go to work," Hart told the *Post.*

Hart was sickened soon after Costa fell ill. "I was in denial. I couldn't believe this was happening to me," Hart told the *Post*. "You're getting sicker, and your whole world is getting smaller."

While Hart recovered, the disease ravaged Costa. Ultimately, he was placed on a ventilator and slipped into a coma. "I keep thinking, now there is one less ICU doctor to care for pandemic patients in Baltimore," Hart told the *Baltimore Sun.*

Hart reiterated the importance of taking proper precautions to stop the spread of the virus. "When you see people without masks, you think, 'Are you out of your mind?'" Hart told the *Post*, "This disease will take you out in a heartbeat."

A statement released by Mercy Medical Center officials noted Costa "dedicated his life and career to caring for the sickest patients. And when the global pandemic came down upon us, Joe selflessly continued his work on the front lines—deeply committed to serving our patients and our City during this time of great need. His memory will live on as an example to us all."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there are now more than 4.6 million cases in the US, and more than 154,000 deaths. The culpability for this catastrophe lies squarely with the capitalist class and its state apparatus. With the lifting of the limited restrictions that were imposed earlier this year and the drive to reopen the workplaces and the schools, the ruling class has effectively abandoned any measures necessary to control the spread of the coronavirus and is allowing the pandemic to run rampant throughout the country.

Cumulatively, the Washington D.C., Maryland and Virginia region has begun to see an increase of COVID-19 along with the rest of the country as states have begun to reopen. On Friday, the region counted a total of 186,277 confirmed cases with 6,187 deaths. In late July, White House coronavirus task force leader Deborah Birx listed the city of Baltimore among a dozen major cities reporting a troubling increase in infections.

Health care workers in the US—not just physicians and nurses, but also EMTs, paramedics, hospital staff and medical technologists—have been on the front lines. At least 119,639 have tested positive for the coronavirus, and at least 587 have died. The CDC acknowledges this to be a significant undercount.

Another tally by National Nurses United, the nation's largest nurses union, as of June 17, found that at least 939 health care workers have died of the disease. Nurses represent around 15 percent of those deaths.

Nurses across the US have related that hospitals are failing to provide adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), failing to report infections among

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staff, facing perpetual personnel shortages and lack the ventilators needed to deal with the overflow of sick patients.

Julia, a labor and delivery nurse on the West Coast, wrote in a recent Facebook post about the shortages of PPE: “The CDC says we should have N95 and goggles when a patient is pushing in the second stage (of labor). Our hospital isn’t giving them to us. They are saying it’s a regional thing, and they’re looking into it.”

Kendra, a nurse at a major hospital in the Midwest, spoke about the absence of a system of notifying nurses if they have been exposed to COVID-19. “I’m sure the CDC infection count is an underestimate. So many of us at work have been exposed and nothing has been done. There are rules stating that if you are exposed without proper PPE you are supposed to get tested and not go to work if you develop symptoms, but what if we never know we’ve been exposed?”

The shortages of PPE, ventilators and staff cannot be attributed to a lack of funding on the part of the hospitals. The largest hospital chains have benefited enormously from the multi-trillion-dollar CARES Act corporate bailout. Rather than provide adequate protections for their staff, hospitals have taken advantage of the crisis by putting through longstanding restructuring plans and instituting mass layoffs in order to maintain profits.

Most recently, the management of Michigan Medical, the medical center associated with the University of Michigan, terminated 738 nurses, technicians and other health care workers, a clear-cut example of health care executives putting profits over the lives and health of people. Overall, hundreds of thousands of health care workers have been laid off since the start of the pandemic.

The brazen criminality, greed, and incompetence of the American bourgeoisie has found its most noxious expression in the ignorance and cold-hearted actions of President Donald Trump. Behind Trump’s buffoonery lies the calculation of a financial oligarchy bent on maximizing its profits, regardless of the cost in human life and suffering. Health care workers must join with all other sections of the working class to build rank-and-file safety committees to take their health and safety—and the health of their patients—into their own hands.

This, in turn, can only be viable as part of a broader revolutionary struggle to overthrow capitalism and build a socialist society based on meeting the needs of the people and not on the accumulation of profit.

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