

“Why do I, an EMT, have to sob, plead with you to take a patient?!”

Overstretched Russian hospitals turn away COVID cases

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In scenes similar to those happening around the globe, hospitals in Russia are collapsing under the weight of a surge in seriously ill COVID-19 patients. The situation is particularly severe in the country's provinces, which have been hard hit in recent years by health care “optimization” measures that shuttered facilities to cut costs. Those that remained are now turning away the sick.

A video of a medical worker in Khakassia, a region in southern Siberia not far from the border with Mongolia, surfaced on the internet and quickly went viral.

“I will not bring her home to die—a 90 year old. This person survived the war, what are you saying! Why do I, an EMT, have to sob, plead with you to take a patient?” cries the distressed paramedic as she tries to convince hospital personnel to accept the ill woman.

After word of the emergency call became known, the hospital claimed it would find a place for the patient if she tested positive for COVID-19. She was turned away and sent home. The medical worker heard on the recording subsequently suffered a nervous breakdown.

A video appeal sent to President Vladimir Putin and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu by another Khakassia paramedic describes the overstrained hospital system in the region.

“There aren't enough beds. We take patients to hospitals as a formality such that the medics are relieved of their responsibility, and then they send them home. In the pharmacies there are no medicines or antibiotics. What there is (available) is at a price five to six times high. It's simply unreal.”

He explains that ambulances wait at the doors of the ER for six to 10 hours with patients hooked up to the vehicle's mobile oxygen supply. When it runs out, they

hope they can be connected to the hospital's source. “I simply have no words,” he says.

Popular anger over the situation in Khakassia has been exacerbated by the fact that signs posted on the door at a local hospital inform patients that if they have lost their sense of taste and smell—symptoms of COVID—they will not receive a COVID test, there is nothing that can be done for them, and they just have to wait a few weeks for the symptoms to pass. A second note tells people that if they want, they can pay for a COVID test at the building next door.

In response to the situation, the federal health ministry announced it was sending a team to investigate the situation and provide “practical” support.

Khakassia is one of four regions in Russia identified by Kremlin deputy prime minister Tatyana Golikova as among the hardest hit by the pandemic. The others include Chuvash, Ivanovo, and the Jewish Autonomous Oblast, although COVID rates are rising in all but two of the country's 85 regions.

In Volgograd a woman told the press outlet Gazeta.ru that she spent eight hours traversing the region in an ambulance with her father, whose oxygen saturation levels had fallen to 83 percent, looking for a hospital that would take him. No beds were available. He died and six family members contracted the virus as the result of exposure when trying to care for him.

In Yuzhnouralsk, a Siberian city in Chelyabinsk Oblast, a hospital turned away a young mother with oxygen saturation levels of 90 percent and bilateral lung damage of 35 percent. According to the woman's relative, by the time some patients are finally given a hospital bed, they have already lost half of their lung functioning.

The Russian government recently issued new directives regarding the treatment of COVID patients at home. People are to isolate the sick person in a completely separate room and keep the elderly and those with chronic illnesses away. For millions of ordinary Russians who live in small apartments with multiple generations, these are absurd and impossible requirements.

The lack of hospital beds and proper facilities to isolate the ill from the healthy are fueling the spread of the pandemic. In St. Petersburg, a city of 5 million, 91 percent of hospital beds are occupied. The situation in the country is being made all the worse by the high rate of false negatives on COVID-19 tests, which officials estimate to be as much as 40 percent.

Over the last week, infections in Russia have hovered between 20,000 and 22,000 per day. On Thursday, daily deaths rose to 439, a new record. While Russia claims that so far only slightly more than 32,000 people out of the over 1.8 million infected have died from coronavirus, since the start of the pandemic there have been an excess 120,000 deaths in the country.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov described the coronavirus situation in Russia this week as “alarming.” Nonetheless, President Putin stated that the government understands and is in command of the situation. He insisted there will not be a new lockdown of the economy. He made these remarks even as government officials identified the use of mass transit as one of the primary sources of the spreading infection.

The Russian government will also disburse an additional 29.7 billion rubles (\$385 million) to the regions to cover the cost of medicines and compensate health care workers. Thousands of medical personnel across the country have been reporting for months that they have never received promised bonuses from earlier this year.



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