

# Coronavirus deaths reach record high in Germany as hospitals teeter on brink of collapse

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The death toll from the coronavirus continues to grow relentlessly. Approximately 1.8 million people have died worldwide and more than 81.5 million have been infected. On Monday, the death toll since the beginning of the pandemic in Germany surpassed the 30,000 mark. Since December 10, more than 10,000 people have died, which equates to an average of over 500 per day, or one death every three minutes.

More than 1.66 million people have been infected by SARS-CoV-2 in Germany, although the number of undetected cases is much higher. Over the holiday period, significantly fewer cases have been recorded and transmitted to the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), Germany's national agency for infectious diseases. On Tuesday, the RKI reported almost 13,000 infections and 852 deaths for the previous 24 hours. On Wednesday morning, the RKI reported 22,459 infections and 1,129 deaths, the first time the daily death toll has surpassed 1,000.

The fact that the situation is worsening by the day is shown above all by conditions in hospitals. For months, health care staff have been struggling in hospitals to save lives, but the conditions are increasingly catastrophic due to high infection rates. Nurses in Hamburg went public to speak about working conditions shortly before Christmas. The private management of Asklepios Clinics (AK) threatened a nurse with the loss of her job as a result.

Romana Knezevic spoke openly on public broadcaster NDR's *Hamburg Journal* show about the conditions at AK St. Georg. "The situation is extremely serious," she said on December 17. "The intensive care capacity is totally used up." For some time, they had been short-staffed, especially in intensive care, she

continued. Then, the coronavirus pandemic came along and "a flood of coronavirus patients we have to care for in addition, that breaks all structures," added Knezevic.

"The intensive care colleagues are working with staff-to-patient ratios of one to five; normally it would be one to two or one to one," she continued. In addition, "we have to take over tasks from the cleaning personnel and service staff. Just like us, they have also been cut back to the bone." The situation is a tremendous burden for health care staff, especially because it is no longer even possible to provide patients with dignified end-of-life care. "The patients die alone in their rooms," she said.

The response of the hospital's management was swift. Instead of seriously investigating the terrible conditions and working rapidly to improve them, they threatened to fire the courageous nurse. A spokesman of the Asklepios Clinics told the *Hamburger Morgenpost* that it is "unacceptable for employees to deliberately spread false information to media outlets or portray emergency situations as the norm for ideological or political motivations." This would shake the confidence of Hamburg's population, they added.

Statements of solidarity with Romana have continued to grow in response. The Hamburg Hospital Movement, a nurses' organisation, described her threatened firing as a "transparent attempt at intimidation" and confirmed that it had triggered "outrage and anger" among nurses. One user wrote on Twitter, "Are you being damned serious? (Now) firing people for their criticism? Solidarity with Romana Knezevic!"

The reliability of Knezevic's testimony is underscored by the fact that a growing number of hospitals report that their intensive care facilities are

operating at the limits of their capacity. Several hospitals in Thuringia issued emergency calls over the Christmas period, and the Eisenach hospital explicitly declared that it cannot take any more coronavirus patients.

The Eichsfeld hospital also stated that it is operating at its capacity limit, as it has permanently been treating around 30 seriously ill coronavirus patients. “In addition, between six and eight of them are in intensive care,” the hospital’s medical director told the *Thüringer Allgemeine*. “If there is now an increase, we won’t be able to care for routine cases.” Emergencies have already been directed to other hospitals, such as the university hospital in Göttingen. “We will only get respite by reducing the number of coronavirus infections and thus the serious cases as well,” they added.

The steps required to reduce coronavirus cases and bring the pandemic under control have been well known for a long time. This was pointed out recently by the virologist Prof. Melanie Brinkmann in comments to the *Tagesthemen* show on public broadcaster ARD. She noted that the official target incidence rate of 50 cases per 100,000 inhabitants within a seven-day period is much too high. “That is not an incidence at which we have control,” she said. Only when the incidence sinks below 20 will the local health offices be able to work effectively, find all those infected through tests, and isolate all contacts. The current incidence is 150 nationally, although some regions, such as Meißen and the Vogtland district in Saxony, are well over 500.

In a detailed report in *Der Spiegel* on Christmas Day, statements from leading virologists on the new coronavirus strain that emerged in England and has spread rapidly around the world were presented. The scientists were agreed that the first and decisive countermeasure must consist of a drastic reduction of infections.

Virologist Isabella Eckerle from the University Hospital of Geneva pointed out that almost all countries have “reached the limits of their health care systems, intensive care units, lab tests, and contact tracing.” A more infectious strain would “lead to a tragedy in January and February,” the virologist warned. “It would be a mistake to first await the confirmation of the presence of the new virus strain in various

countries.” In a tweet from December 24, Eckerle advised, “On the basis of this data, the geographical region of Europe (not just the EU) should prepare for a coordinated, complete lockdown.”

But this will only happen if the working class intervenes independently into political events and enforces a lockdown by means of a Europe-wide general strike. Governments of all political stripes have, by contrast, made absolutely clear that they want to lift the limited lockdowns as quickly as possible so as not to threaten the profits of the banks and big business.

A drastic example of the dominance of the capitalist profit system is the closure of hospitals during the pandemic for the sole reason that their operation is “uneconomical.” Shortly before Christmas, the hospital in Ingelheim was closed, with the loss of 190 jobs. “It was an intact facility, with staff and ventilators, everything that we urgently need in the pandemic,” Works Councillor Stefanie Klemann told Radio FFH. The decision to close the facility at this point confirms the catastrophic consequences of the austerity and privatisation policies over the past 30 years. In fact, according to a Bertelsmann Foundation study published last year, fewer than 600 of the current 1,400 hospitals are planned for retention.



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