

Hospitals in Germany reach crisis point

Markus Salzmann**5 April 2021**

Despite urgent warnings from doctors and scientists, the federal and state governments are sticking to their policy of opening up the economy and are refusing to take urgently needed measures, such as the immediate closure of schools and businesses. The result is a dramatic situation in Germany's hospitals, where, within a very short time, the care of seriously ill patients will no longer be guaranteed.

The seven-day incidence rate is currently 134.2 infections per 100,000 people per day—and rising. On April 1, almost 22,700 new infections occurred. With 232 deaths, almost 50 more people died than a week earlier. One reason for the steady increase in infections is the spread of the much more infectious and aggressive B.1.1.7 strain, which now causes almost 90 percent of infections in Germany and thus contributes to the increase in severe illness.

Patients requiring intensive care treatment are becoming younger and younger. COVID patients in the intensive care unit at Rostock University Hospital are on average 10 years younger than during the last wave of the pandemic, according to a hospital spokesperson. The proportion of patients treated in the intensive care unit (ICU) instead of a normal ward has increased. "It can be deduced from this that there is a high risk of intensive care capacities being overloaded," the spokesperson told broadcaster NDR.

The proportion of children falling seriously ill with the virus is also rising rapidly. "The sharpest increase is seen in children between 0 and 14 years of age, where seven-day incidence rates have more than doubled in the last four weeks," notes the weekly report of the Robert Koch Institute (RKI). Recently, a four-year-old child in Schleswig-Holstein died from the coronavirus.

Data analysis by the scientific institute of the health insurance company AOK showed the effects of the course of the pandemic so far.

Of the nearly 52,000 patients included in the analysis who had been hospitalised with COVID-19 by the end of November 2020, 18 percent died. In the 60- to 69-year-old age group, the mortality rate was 14 percent; and in the 70- to 79-year-old age group, the rate was 23 percent. On average, patients were 67 years old.

A further drop in the average age also means that most

people in this age group are not yet vaccinated, which will contribute to further overcrowding of intensive care units. For this reason, the chairman of the board of the AOK Federal Association, Martin Litsch, warned of the consequences of the third wave when presenting his evaluation. "We have to take countermeasures very quickly and consistently. I almost fear it is too late for that."

Also, more and more people are suffering from the long-term consequences of COVID-19 and must be treated in hospitals more frequently. According to a British study, about one-third of hospital patients must be treated again within four months of initially becoming ill. One in eight even dies because of secondary damage to vital organs, such as the heart, liver or kidneys.

The German Society for Pneumology and Respiratory Medicine (DGP) estimates that about 10 percent of those infected develop what is known as Long COVID Syndrome.

On April 2, there were 3,849 patients in intensive care in Germany, 120 more than the day before. Between March 10-28 alone, the number of intensive care patients rose from 2,727 to 3,448. Currently, there are only about 1,500 ICU beds available for coronavirus patients. Several medical experts have been warning for weeks that these will soon no longer be sufficient and ICUs will be overcrowded within a very short time. Some regions, such as Thuringia, have already reached their capacity limits.

Even before all the available beds are filled, there will no longer be enough qualified staff to take over the complex care patients require. For more than a year, doctors and nurses have been working at their limits, especially in intensive care.

"This is not professional overload, it is physical and psychological," medical experts have warned. "If we don't do anything now and nursing staff leave, we will have an existential problem in intensive care medicine!" says intensive care physician Felix Walcher. Gerhard Schneider, director of intensive care medicine at Munich's Klinikum Rechts der Isar, also told *Der Spiegel* that "a critical limit is now being reached." Regarding the situation facing medical staff he warned, "People can't take any more."

This is also expressed in the fact that thousands of nursing

staff have left the profession since the beginning of the pandemic. Even before that, poor working conditions and even poorer pay were the order of the day. Under the pressures of the pandemic and the constant fear of infecting themselves, many now see only the way out. Recently, therefore, the International Council of Nurses (ICN) warned of an international “mass exodus” from the nursing profession.

Doctors are working under similar conditions. The *Badische Zeitung* quoted hospital doctor Maximilian H.: “The number of coronavirus patients has risen massively during this time. Patients fell ill, many died, and wards were working to the brink of exhaustion. Colleagues also became infected.” The head physician for internal medicine at the Oberlausitzer Bergland Hospital in Zittau died in March after a coronavirus infection. He headed the clinic’s COVID ward and cared for critically ill patients.

Once again, scientists are warning of the dramatic consequences of the current policies. Renowned virologist Christian Drosten believes another lockdown is inevitable. “We will not get around a serious lockdown,” he said. He referred to experiences in other countries where “the number of severe and often fatal outcomes of the disease” had massively increased under a policy like the one in this country.

Christian Karagiannidis, the president of the German Society for Internal Intensive Care and Emergency Medicine, has been calling for an immediate lockdown for weeks. He also referred to the experiences in France. There, he said, there were now so many COVID-19 patients in ICUs that staff had to be deployed who were not even trained for this, and doctors were already preparing to implement a triage system, rationing who does and does not receive treatment.

Virologist Melanie Brinkmann made clear who was responsible for this development. “We could be at tens of incidences by now if politicians at the federal-state conference in January had taken seriously what we told them,” she explained.

It is hardly surprising that the majority of the population supports the call for a tougher lockdown to combat the pandemic. According to a poll by Infratest Dimap, 67 percent agree with the call by intensive care specialists. The current measures do not go far enough for about half of the respondents. On social media, under hashtags such as #generalstrike or #harderlockdownnow, thousands are calling for an end to the deadly policy of reopening the economy pursued by the governments at all levels.

The policies of the grand coalition of Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and Social Democrats (SPD) at the federal level and those of the state governments are solely following the

interests of big business, even as the situation continues to escalate dramatically. All the establishment parties—from the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) to the Left Party—are in complete agreement on this.

In Saarland, the coronavirus restrictions under state Prime Minister Tobias Hans (CDU) will be largely lifted as of Tuesday. Among other things, theatres, cinemas, fitness studios and outdoor restaurants will be open. Up to 10 people will be allowed to gather outdoors.

In Thuringia, where there are counties with an incidence level of 500 and hardly any free ICU beds, the contact rules are being massively relaxed over Easter. The “little spring opening” of the Left Party state government provides, among other things, far-reaching relaxations for the retail sector. This is a conscious decision in favour of the profit interests of the economy and against the protection of the population. State Health Minister Heike Werner (Left Party) declared last week that the third wave “will hit us particularly hard this time due to the rapid spread of viral mutations.”

The Left Party’s unscrupulous policies are not limited to Thuringia. Among others, the Left Party mayor of Frankfurt/Oder, Rene Wilke, is also considered an advocate of a radical reopening policy. Although Frankfurt/Oder is located on the Polish border, where the spread of the virus has also been escalating dramatically for weeks, he only agreed to withdraw some relaxations for a short time after massive pressure and after the local hospital reached its limits. He only tightened contact restrictions in the private sphere up to April 5 when the incidence rate reached 180.

In contrast, the retail sector will remain open. Wilke coldly admitted at a press conference last week that with an incidence value of 180, the emergency brake should have been pulled. He said, however, that he was not aware of any case so far in which infections had occurred because of a visit to a retail outlet. A week ago, he had stated that he would not include two mass outbreaks at a day care centre and a facility for the disabled in the incidence value, as these events were localised.



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