

Charité intensive–Station 43: An unsettling documentary about the reality of the coronavirus

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Charité intensive–Station 43, a documentary about an intensive care unit (ICU) during the coronavirus pandemic, could hardly be more topical. Or, as the chief virologist at Berlin’s Charité hospital, Christian Drosten, put it in early November, it is a “very quiet documentary” that provides political commentary without commenting. The true horror of the deadly pandemic is visible “on the faces of the patients, their children and life partners. And it is reflected in the eyes of the medical staff.”

Drosten delivered the laudatory remarks at the Hanns Joachim Friedrichs Award for Television Journalism ceremony in Cologne on November 4. The prize was awarded to Carl Gierstorfer’s four-part documentary series, *Charité intensive–Station 43*. The director filmed it in an ICU at the Charité during the second wave of the pandemic last winter. It received the German Television Award on September 16.

The camera follows the work of intensive care doctors and nurses in real time as they fight for each and every coronavirus patient, often risking their own physical and mental health. We experience the race against time first hand, as ambulances race through the streets, carrying ventilators and extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO) equipment that provides external oxygen in the event of lung failure.

The highly motivated teams of doctors and nurses, who, unlike in poorer countries, are provided this highly specialized, expensive equipment, at least in Berlin, convey a sense of the lethal danger posed by the coronavirus. The documentary refutes the lie about a “flu-like” illness limited to older people with preconditions, as peddled by COVID deniers and corresponding media reports.

Tragically, many younger people are admitted to the hospital in *Charité intensive–Station 43*, some of whom then pass away. The ICU team sometimes cares for them for several weeks, not only with equipment and medication, but also psychologically. The few comments from patients, from doctors and nurses are touchingly immediate. Everyone knows they are people like you and me.

There is a young, athletic man from Brandenburg who is picked up by the Charité team from a clinic that does not have an ECMO device and wakes up after 35 days in a coma, gradually learning to breathe on his own, pronounce his first name “Marko” and move his limp legs and feet.

Or the IT employee, a giant of a man in the prime of his life, who lives with his wife and children in an apartment he just bought with a large loan. He is admitted after his condition deteriorates sharply following a week of cold symptoms. His life is saved, but he must endure a dangerous operation to remove a blood clot in his lung. He also needs significant therapeutic support to return to his life.

And especially shocking: a worker, also in his prime with growing children, who ultimately fails to survive. At the end, nurses and medics sit with his distraught wife, who is religious, sings gospel songs and puts pictures of the children on the dying man’s back. “You have a beautiful voice,” the senior physician comments, before explaining the hopeless situation to her, a caregiver and her brother, who is connected by video from the United States. The latter thanks the Charité team for its work and expresses his great faith in science.

At the end of *Charité intensive–Station 43*, it is

January 2021, and caregivers and physicians on the team talk about their stressful experiences in the second wave. “We are all afraid of the third wave ... and that we’ll run out of steam,” says intensive care physician Sarah Kamel. And yet, she explains, she can’t help but continue this work.

“It is a historical event of enormous dimensions,” emphasizes senior physician Jan Kruse. He, too, expresses his fear about the next wave. It could get worse, but some of the nursing staff have already quit because they can no longer cope, he says. He hopes that in the future, the services, the personal commitment, the sacrifices of the staff will be better recognized and lead to improvements in working conditions. “I have my doubts about that,” he adds.

His doubts have already been confirmed. Despite weeks of strikes at Charité and the state-owned Vivantes hospital group in recent months, the staffing situation is extremely tense at the start of the fourth wave, and salaries and working hours for the stressful work have barely improved.

Intensive care units are once again filling up; an even worse coronavirus winter is looming. At the same time, not a day goes by without politicians of every stripe downplaying the pandemic in the media, calling for an end to all measures to contain it and demanding that the population live with the virus—that is, with death.

The four-part documentary series is an indictment of every capitalist government, especially the outgoing and incoming governments in Berlin, who are putting the lives of hundreds of thousands of people at risk in the interests of corporations and financial speculators.

At the award ceremony, Drosten complained in particular about the irresponsibility of the media. “Our reality is what the media reflect back to us,” he said, calling on journalists to critically evaluate their reporting to date. “In a pandemic, irresponsible actions cost lives,” he stressed.

The actions of individuals have direct consequences for countless others, he added. “It is also a matter of contributing to society-wide protection. Without widespread vaccination, only reducing contacts can prevent too many serious infections from occurring at once and overburdening the health care system.”

Drosten has been insulted and threatened by the extreme right-wing AfD [Alternative for Germany], as well as the *Bild* tabloid newspaper. In a long interview

in the weekly magazine *Zeit* this week, editor-in-chief Giovanni di Lorenzo tries to corner and portray him as a failed advisor to former Chancellor Angela Merkel with no answer to the pandemic’s fourth wave. In response, the virologist defends his criticism of the media and complains about the constant attacks on individual scientists, which go far beyond the attacks in the *Bild*. “My concern is the general atmosphere, this constant murmuring in reports and interviews, the undertones.”

Drosten continues to insist on mandatory vaccination and booster shots as soon as possible, which would be lifesavers as much as mandatory seat belts in cars. He also defends the “No Covid” initiative. In response to the scornful aside of the *Zeit* editor that this initiative has a “thrust critical of capitalism,” Drosten repeats that the task of scientists is to explain the threatening character of the pandemic. In the end, he expresses disappointment that politicians are not heeding his admonitions.

Workers must take up the warnings and findings of serious scientists like Drosten and the signatories of the recent appeal by 35 renowned physicians and take the initiative themselves. Working people worldwide must unite and build action committees to educate the population based on science and put in place the necessary measures to eliminate COVID-19. This includes universal vaccination of the population, as well as the closure of schools and non-essential businesses, with full pay for workers affected. The health care system and vaccine and drug production must be taken out of the profit system and placed under the control of the working class and medical personnel.

No serious protective measures can be expected from governments and business associations. Their attitude is not only irresponsible, but criminal. It is time to take the political and medical reins out of their hands.

Charité intensive–Station 43 *can be viewed in the ARD media library until April 1, 2022.*



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