

German hospitals face deepening crisis as COVID-19 infections and deaths rise

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The dominance of the coronavirus variants BA.4 and BA.5 as well as the ending of any protective measures against COVID-19 have produced a rapid increase in the number of infections. On Thursday, the Robert Koch Institute, Germany's central agency for infectious diseases, reported 135,402 new coronavirus infections, and on Tuesday there were as many as 147,489. The 7-day incidence rose to over 690 infections per 100,000 inhabitants, from 650 on Monday.

These figures do not even begin to reflect the real extent of the disaster. The abolition of free testing, the scrapping of compulsory testing for certain activities, and the dramatic reduction of testing options mean that only a portion of total infections is registered. Every day, 100 to 200 people are dying of COVID-19. Officially, there have already been 142,000 coronavirus deaths in Germany.

As a result of the murderous policy of mass infection, the hospitals, which have been at their limits for two-and-a-half years, are once again on the brink of collapse. On Monday, according to the daily report of the Intensive Care Register of the German Interdisciplinary Association for Intensive Care and Emergency Medicine (DIVI), the number of coronavirus intensive care patients rose above 1,000. This is the highest number of patients since mid-May.

The scientific director of the DIVI, Christian Karagiannidis, warned that the hospital bed occupancy rate for the summer season was relatively high. The number of available beds will continue to decline due to staff shortages, he added. It is not only the increasing number of hospital admissions that is pushing the entire health care system to the limit. Ever-increasing numbers of employees are getting infected and are therefore absent from the workplace.

The chief executive of the German Hospital Society (DKG), Gerald Gass, told the Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland (RND): "We receive reports from all federal states that individual wards and departments must be closed due to staff shortages." At times, even emergency room admissions are affected.

"We see bottlenecks in hospitals, especially in Schleswig-Holstein with its particularly high infection rates," said Susanne Johna, chairwoman of the Marburger Bund doctors' union, in *Handelsblatt*. "The health system is reaching its limits in places. In the third year of the pandemic, this is a real disaster."

Looking ahead to the upcoming autumn wave, Johna explained: "Then we will not only be dealing with a coronavirus, but probably also with an aggressive flu wave. This combination of coronavirus and influenza waves would be a real problem, as the health care system would then have to deal with two serious diseases on a large scale."

Entire departments of large hospitals are already paralysed. The University Hospital Schleswig-Holstein (UKSH) had to close several wards at its Kiel and Lübeck sites due to staff shortages. On July 1, 479 employees were in isolation, a number that rose to over 600 by July 8.

The shortage of personnel, which has been rampant for a long time, is also having a major impact in other federal states. The situation in Saxony's hospitals is also extremely tenuous due to coronavirus cases in the workforce and the general lack of nursing staff. "The economic situation and staff shortages make the situation more difficult," said the deputy managing director of the Saxony Hospital Association Friedrich R. München. He pointed out that "future service restrictions" cannot be ruled out.

The provision of care has already deteriorated

compared to the time before the pandemic. At the St. Georg Clinic in Leipzig, around a quarter fewer beds are currently in operation. This is due to staff shortages and COVID-19 absences.

According to a spokeswoman for the hospital, more nurses than ever before have decided to leave the health care system in the last two years. Only the “dedicated commitment of our employees” has so far prevented the closure of entire wards, she said.

Only five of 11 operating theatres were in operation in the Asklepios Klinik Nord Heidberg in Hamburg last week, according to the company. All areas of the University Hospital Hamburg-Eppendorf (UKE) are also affected by staff shortages. “Around 250 of more than 14,400 employees are currently in isolation. Therefore, since the beginning of the pandemic, planned and non-urgent operations have had to be postponed again and again and beds have had to be closed,” the hospital said.

Throughout Germany, dozens of other hospitals have agreed to reduce their operating capacities.

At the hospital in Erding, Bavaria, an average of 140 out of 800 employees are currently ill every day. In addition, there are numerous vacancies that cannot be filled. In the meantime, one ward is completely closed, while others can only be operated to a limited extent and some planned operations can’t be carried out.

The *Merkur* newspaper reported on a doctor at a Munich hospital. There are currently only three out of eight operating theatres in operation, he explained. Ongoing operations are sometimes aborted due to an emergency. “And it’s now midsummer, not winter.” The doctor said he has never experienced such a dramatic shortage of personnel.

The strike by nurses at the university hospitals in North Rhine-Westphalia also demonstrates the catastrophic situation in health care. Employees are now in their tenth week of strike action at six university hospitals. While the Verdi trade union is working to break the strike by concluding a so-called “relief collective agreement,” the workers are protesting against the unsustainable conditions that endanger the lives and well-being of patients and employees.

Even in the face of these disastrous developments, the government is sticking to its pandemic policy. Health Minister Karl Lauterbach (Social Democrats) and other government representatives have made it clear that

effective measures such as lockdowns and school and business closures will no longer be considered under any circumstances. Chancellor Olaf Scholz stated in his summer interview with public broadcaster ARD: “School closures should no longer take place.”

Some states have repealed the last few remaining measures. In Bavaria, the state government recently abolished the compulsory requirement to wear a mask on public transport. Health Minister Klaus Holetschek (Christian Social Union) defended the decision with the right-wing mantra: “We are thus focusing more on the personal responsibility of the citizens.”

Under conditions of staff shortages due to coronavirus infections, Free Democratic Party Vice-President Wolfgang Kubicki called for a further reduction of the quarantine period for people who test positive to three days.

The trade unions are also defending the “profits before lives” policy. Maïke Finner of the teachers union (GEW) told the RND that new school and day care closures in the autumn must be prevented. It is precisely the reopening of child care facilities and schools that have led to an explosive increase in infections and facilitated the spread of virus mutations.

In Berlin, the Social Democrat/Left Party/Green state government, the so-called “red-red-green Senate,” is implementing an austerity policy on health care. The district of Neukölln alone is to reduce its coronavirus staff from 54 to 10 employees. Neukölln’s public health doctor Nicolai Savaskan stated that this will no longer guarantee the protection of vulnerable groups in old people’s homes and nursing homes. “That means serious cases and deaths,” said the doctor.



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