

Chinese hospitals face deluge of patients with end of Zero COVID

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Public hospitals in major Chinese metropolitan centers are being swamped with COVID patients showing fevers and respiratory symptoms, according to widespread reports in the Asian press. This worrisome upsurge takes place only a matter of days after the complete abandonment of Zero COVID.

The official claims that the seven-day average of new COVID cases in China has been sharply declining recently have no factual foundation. Over the past two weeks, centralized testing has been dismantled and the “mobile itinerary cards” on cell phones that track travel history have been deactivated. The true levels of COVID infections and their geographic locations are no longer visible on the map of the pandemic. Only official reports on the number going to clinics and hospitals and the number of the dead provide an indication of the scale of China’s growing public health crisis.

Health officials in Beijing said at a briefing on Monday that 22,000 patients had attended fever clinics the day before, a rate 16 times higher than the prior week. An eye surgeon speaking on conditions of anonymity with the *Washington Post* indicated that half the hospital staff where she worked had recently tested positive for COVID. She added, “Patients who visit the fever clinic have grown several times compared with last week, and it’s likely to go on for weeks or even months more.”

The sudden surge in patients has caused confusion in health systems, and the level of panic among official responders and the population at large is palpable in the reports being given by health workers to the media.

While hospitals have been ordered to expand their staffing, stock more medical resources and intensive care supplies, the number of hospital beds and ICU capacity will be unable to meet the deluge of patients

that densely populated cities are expecting. Over-the-counter anti-fever medications are running short in supply and price gouging is being reported for such goods. Meanwhile, close contacts and those infected with mild symptoms are being told to stay home, running the risk of infecting their friends and families, including the elders in the household, who are most vulnerable.

Chinese state media has been asking the population to avoid using the emergency hotlines unless severely ill. At the Beijing Emergency Medical Center, call volumes have jumped six-fold, with 30,000 calls per day. Where previously long lines were waiting for testing, now people are queuing outside hospitals and pharmacies.

Illness among medical staff and workers means the beginning of disruption for health and basic services. These mean delays and staffing shortages which wreak havoc on organizing shifts and the smooth transitions required for the safe administration of care to patients. Healthcare workers are being called in from their days off and vacations to cover for colleagues who have fallen ill.

With COVID restrictions lifted and testing requirements being abandoned, hospitals will become vectors of new infections for those seeking care for other health conditions. A medical worker said that at his hospital in Beijing patients are being asked to sign disclaimers acknowledging admission may result in catching COVID. Urgent procedures and treatments will have to be withheld in order to attend to the immediate care of those who have fallen ill, and treatable ailments may thus become life threatening.

A medical worker at a Beijing hospital who withheld his name reported that more than half of the staff had been infected and the nurse-to-patient ratio had

quadrupled to one in 10. Over two-thirds of the 1,000-bed hospital was devoted in treating COVID patients. Many families seeking medical attention are being turned away due to high patient loads.

The numbers being reported by the National Health Commission no longer reflect reality. Prominent pulmonologist and epidemiologist Dr. Zhong Nanshan, who was a leading adviser in managing the crisis when the pandemic first broke out in Wuhan three years ago, told state media, “We can see that hundreds of thousands or tens of thousands of people are infected in several major cities.”

Zhong, who previously promoted the traditional Chinese medicine, Lianhua Qingwen, for the treatment of influenza, is playing a critical role in downplaying the dangers posed by COVID, comparing the pandemic’s fatality rates to the flu. “The death rate from Omicron is around 0.1 percent, similar to the common flu, and the infection rarely reaches the lungs,” he claimed. “Most people recover from the variant within seven to 10 days.”

Like his counterparts in the west, Zhong presents boosters as means of mitigating the impact of the inevitable spread of the pandemic. “It’s unlikely people will stay put for the 2023 Lunar New year holiday,” he continued, “so I advise those who travel home to get booster shots so that even if they are infected, symptoms will be mild.” During the holiday, hundreds of millions of Chinese head back to their provinces to reunite with their families which will only exacerbate the spread of the coronavirus.

Responding to these developments, Dr. Zhang Wenhong, chief of the Infectious Diseases division at Shanghai’s Huashan Hospital, told his staff that the months ahead will be difficult. If the Chinese Communist Party elects to let the virus runs its course in one massive surge, he stated, the catastrophic impact of the infections on the health system will drive mortality rates higher than those projected in the best-case scenario that is being presented. He added that he disagreed with Zhong’s claim that Omicron only attacks the upper respiratory tract and declared that he is seeing cases of pneumonia too.

Two hundred million of China’s 1.412 billion population are over the age of sixty-five and 40 million are over eighty. They are the least boosted with the current versions of the Chinese COVID vaccines and

are at highest risk. The level of COVID fatalities in the US and Europe with Omicron suggests that there could easily be more than 500,000 deaths among the elderly in China in the next several months.

If access to health care is severely impacted and resources exhausted, however, the estimates made by several prominent studies that somewhere between 1.5 and 2 million people could die of COVID in China are reasonable and harrowing. Though the vaccination campaign has recommenced to get shots into older Chinese arms, the upheaval caused by the current surge will certainly redirect resources to immediate care and the vaccine campaign may very well fall far short of what is being promised. Currently the seven-day average in COVID vaccines has only reached 700,000 per day, a startlingly anemic figure for the most populous country in the world.

Professor Ali Mokdad at the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation and chief strategy officer for population health at the University of Washington, in a statement to *Japan Times*, said, “It will be all over the country almost at the same time, but first in urban areas and then in rural because of the crowding. It will be one month from now when we see very high number of cases, and mortality will come two weeks later. It will never come back down to where it is now.”

In response to these developments, the population isn’t responding with joyous shouts of “freedom” and celebration of the end of Zero-COVID and lockdowns. A sense of dread grips the country. With cases and illnesses expected to swell, people are staying home, avoiding public venues and spending. Many have canceled trips and are afraid it will be impossible to avoid infection.

Dr. Eric Topol, director of the Scripps Research Translational Institute in La Jolla, California, told *Bloomberg*, “Unless they get uptake of better vaccines and boosters quickly across the whole population, it looks like lockdowns will no longer hold and a huge surge is in store. It looks like major trouble is brewing.”



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