

Japan's health care system pushed to collapse by COVID-19 cases

Ben McGrath
9 January 2023

Japan is currently experiencing one of its worst COVID-19 surges since the pandemic began three years ago. Total official cases have now exceeded more than 30 million while deaths reached 60,000 on Sunday. Both are underestimates of the real figures and the overall toll of the pandemic. None of this gives the government of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida pause as it presses ahead with the removal of remaining mitigation measures.

On January 5, Japan reported a single-day record high of 498 deaths, a fact that exposes the official lie that the pandemic is over. In December alone, official deaths spiked sharply with approximately 10,000 people succumbing to the virus. In comparison, it took 14 months to first reach the first 10,000 deaths in the pandemic while it took only four months to rise from 40,000 to 50,000.

Daily new cases have skyrocketed over the past two months reaching well over 200,000, following relatively low figures in October after the summer surge. Now, at least 12 prefectures have posted record-high cases, while nine have had record-high numbers of deaths. The highest daily case number was recorded on January 6 with 245,542, coming close to the record peak of 261,252 on August 19.

The true extent of the situation is not known as infected people recovering at home are not recorded as official cases. In addition, the dangerous new XBB.1.5 variant has also been detected in Japan, believed to be the most immune-evasive strain yet, meaning vaccination and previous infections offer little or no protection.

The real situation is therefore far more serious than presented by the government and in the media, which are inundating the public with claims that the pandemic is finished. Toho University Professor Tateda

Kazuhiro, who sits on the government's COVID-19 advisory board, warned that cases could rise later this month as high as 450,000 per day.

Excess deaths point to the real impact of the pandemic. In August, during the height of the summer surge, approximately 7,000 people died from infection with COVID-19, according to Health Ministry figures. However, the National Institute of Infectious Diseases estimated in the same month that there were between 12,000 and 17,000 excess deaths.

According to figures released last February, the year 2021 set a record for the number of deaths in the post-war period with 1,452,289, driven by the Delta variant of COVID-19. This was an increase of 67,745 deaths over the previous year. Similarly high numbers are expected for 2022 as a result of the spread of the numerous Omicron subvariants.

Hospital bed occupancy rates are rising, with beds for COVID-19 patients in Tokyo for example filled to 55.3 percent of capacity as of January 5. Patients are also being admitted to hospitals for different ailments and becoming infected.

In an interview with Tokai TV, Dr. Kobayashi, head of the Sakura General Hospital in the town of Oguchi, Aichi Prefecture, stated that the official prefectural hospital bed occupancy rate of 70 percent did not reflect the true situation. "We're actually at 95 percent or more," he said. "No mistake about it. We're on the eve of collapse. If this wave continues for much longer, or if another wave strikes before this one recedes, we're in a state where collapse is going to be imminent. I can say that with certainty."

Doctors in Fukuoka Prefecture are warning that they can only accept the most severe cases, despite an official bed occupancy rate of just 8.2 percent. Following a record number of deaths of 36 in the

prefecture on January 6, Dr. Ishikura Hiroyasu, head of Fukuoka University Hospital Emergency and Critical Care Center, warned: “People on respirators are in critical condition, so others are dying before even having the opportunity to get hooked on the respirator. This is what contributes to the rise in the death count, and I think when such a rise begins, it is the start of collapse for health care.”

The pandemic continues to have a serious impact on patients with other conditions as well. The number of cases where ambulances transporting patients in the country’s 52 major metropolitan areas rose to 7,158 during the week of December 26, exceeding the previous record-high from the week earlier by 358 cases.

Government officials have tried to downplay the recent surge. One official from Kumamoto Prefecture telling the media, “The reports may have been concentrated because medical facilities were closed during the year-end and New Year holidays. We need to see how the situation develops.”

As part of dismantling necessary public health measures, the government has restricted the free availability of the more reliable PCR tests. People showing symptoms can get tested while those who are asymptomatic and have not been referred by a doctor must pay for a test or are simply unable to access one at all. It is designed to prevent workers from accessing reliable testing and keeping them on the job.

The government is also planning to lower COVID-19 from its current classification as a Category II infectious disease to Category V, the lowest in the tier system. The move would make it easier to keep infected people working and further reduce reporting of new cases, while justifying ending the indoor mask-wearing requirement. Prime Minister Kishida made clear that the economy was at the heart of these changes, saying on December 26, “We hope to fully take back normal life and achieve a strong economic rebound next year.”

Travel has been renewed, with Tokyo aiming to bring in 5 trillion yen (\$US37.9 billion) in annual tourist spending. On December 21, the Japan National Tourism Organization reported that the number of foreign travelers to Japan the previous month reached 934,500. It was the first full month in which mitigation measures for travelers had been fully scrapped.

At the same time, Japan is imposing restrictions on travelers from mainland China, demanding a negative PCR test upon arrival. Travelers from Hong Kong and Macao are exempt, even as both places have experienced a spike in new cases. This measure has nothing to do with stopping the spread of the virus, but instead is meant to further demonize China in the minds of the public. All of this demonstrates that the pandemic in Japan, as around the world, is far from over.



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