

German government decimates research funding for Long Covid

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With the 2024 federal budget, the German government has ushered in a new era in social policy. In order to finance the huge costs of military rearmament and to continue the enrichment of a small minority, government funds for pensions, care, welfare, and public infrastructure are being slashed.

Among the many cuts that have hardly attracted public notice so far are the funds for research into Long Covid and the development of therapies and drugs against it. Instead of €100 million as originally announced, Health Minister Karl Lauterbach (Social Democrat, SPD) wants to make only €21 million available for this purpose. Representatives of doctors, clinics and statutory health insurers want to raise another €20 million.

Although these are relatively low sums in the tens of millions, the consequences will be devastating. Millions of people, some of whom are seriously ill with Long Covid, will be abandoned to their fate. The massive cut in research funding is a slap in the face for all Long Covid sufferers.

Although Lauterbach claims that further money could be made available in the coming years, this is just a farce. Clinical research is so complex and expensive that it is only worthwhile if projects have permanent and stable funding. If money is only provided year by year, top researchers cannot be retained, nor necessary teams built up.

In fact, even the €100 million originally announced would only have been a drop in the ocean. There is a great lack of studies and therapies regarding Long Covid, as well as knowledge and corresponding capacities among medical personnel. For example, the waiting time at the outpatient clinic specialised in Long Covid at Berlin's Charité hospital is around six months. A plan regarding how to better care for Long

Covid patients is not to be published until the end of the year.

Long Covid is not an individual problem, but affects broad sections of the population. According to figures from the World Health Organisation, one in 30 people in Europe is affected. In Germany, that would be well over two million people. According to estimates by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), up to 36 million Europeans could have developed Long Covid in the last three years.

Depending on the estimate, between 6 and 14 percent of those infected with coronavirus develop long-term consequences. The effects cover a wide spectrum: some struggle exhausted through their everyday work and social life, others are completely unable to work. Almost all bodily organs can be damaged by the consequences, and many victims suffer for years.

In severe cases, such as myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome (ME/CFS), only symptoms can be treated. According to figures from the National Association of Statutory Health Insurance Physicians, 500,000 people were already suffering from ME/CFS in 2021.

Numerous local media have published reports from Long Covid sufferers in recent weeks. They describe how they struggle with the long-term consequences of their coronavirus infection and how doctors have no way of responding appropriately.

"I am now working full time again, but of course I also regularly have so-called crashes, breakdowns, where it literally sends me packing and I have to go on sick leave," Bianka Kilian reports in *Sachsenspiegel*. "I've been struggling with it for two and a half years now. It is very difficult. There are phases when it's better, there are phases when it's extremely bad. The doctors are sometimes powerless because they simply

don't know about the disease.”

In the *Hessenschau*, André Fouraté reports that he has been affected since the beginning of 2022 and would have liked more help even then: “One wonders why the measures didn't exist two years ago.” He also denounces the lack of competent centres and outpatient clinics specialised in the care of Long Covid patients: “The Charité and Marburg [hospitals] are the first to be mentioned. Then there are two or three places—and that's it.”

Health Minister Lauterbach, a medical doctor by training, knows very well what the consequences of his cutbacks are. “After all, we have declared the pandemic over,” he told a federal press conference. “For people with Long Covid, the pandemic is far from over. The future of Long Covid has unfortunately just begun.”

In fact, despite Lauterbach's assertion, the pandemic is by no means over either. It is true that systemic surveillance of the virus has been discontinued. The Robert Koch Institute has not issued any Covid weekly reports since June 8 and discontinued its pandemic radar on July 1. However, indicators such as the viral load in wastewater show the extent to which the virus is still rampant.

Last week, 73 percent of wastewater sites reported an increasing viral load. The previous week, it was only 29 percent. In other countries, such as the US, sewage trackers also point to the beginning of a new wave of the pandemic.

This wave of infections is bound to be followed by another wave of people suffering with Long Covid. Lauterbach knows this. “We have to assume that many more will contract Long Covid,” he told the press conference.

Lauterbach explains the cutting of Long Covid funding to one fifth the initial proposal by citing the current budget situation. This makes it clear where the money is actually going: While the health budget will be reduced from €64.4 billion in 2022 to €16.2 billion next year, the military budget will increase to €51.8 billion plus another €20 billion from the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) special fund.



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