

Doctors in Turkey warn of new pandemic wave

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Influenza, RSV (Respiratory syncytial virus) and COVID-19 outbreaks have been progressing unabated in Turkey for more than a month. The Ministry of Health is trying to hide the impact of COVID, which is causing thousands of excess deaths every month, to avoid taking the necessary measures against the pandemic.

Despite being aware of the scope of the public health crisis, the Ministry of Health has downplayed the latest wave, describing it as a seasonal cold. In a statement published on the Ministry's website on January 18, Health Minister Fahrettin Koca responded to the question, "What should be done in this period of increasing upper respiratory infections?" with the answer, "We should act as we normally do in the face of cold and flu-related complaints. As we have all experienced many times, such ailments disappear in a short time with simple measures".

Doctors disagree with the minister. In an online press statement on January 10, Dr. Emrah Kirimli, head of the Family Medicine Department of the Turkish Medical Association, said that during the pandemic period there were waves similar to today's, but those waves receded due to the measures taken. Today we are facing a much more serious situation due to the lack of containment measures.

Kirimli noted that they had talked to family doctors all over Turkey and almost all of them painted the same picture: "The minister says it is a cold, but we know what a cold is. Our patients do not have a cold, they have COVID and influenza. We are losing some of them. But there are no tests or diagnoses. People are forced to work sick. The burden of the pandemic is on the shoulders of the health workers. ASMs [Family Health Centers] are turning into areas of infection because of space problems. There is a 'let the dying

die, let the sick get sick' approach. The Minister of Health is responsible for all this."

Kirimli evaluated the last month as follows: "All schools are collapsing due to sickness, workers are collapsing due to sickness. Due to the examination period in schools and the working conditions and pressure of the bosses in the workplaces, our citizens cannot rest. They work, work even though they are sick. They go to work and school under these conditions and continue to spread the epidemic to those around them in schools and workplaces or on public transportation."

Prof. Dr. Esin Davutoğlu of Gazi University published an article on the *Halktv* website on January 16 stating that respiratory viruses such as influenza, the new COVID-19 variant JN.1 and RSV, which are the cause of the nationwide outbreaks, are closely associated with strokes, heart attacks and clotting. Excess winter deaths this year have surpassed pre-pandemic levels, she said.

Enol emphasized when speaking to the BBC that there are problems providing appropriate treatment to people at risk due to the lack of testing. She stated that it is important to perform beta tests in the pediatric age group and flu and COVID-19 tests for those aged 15 and above, and that supportive treatment should be applied according to the diagnosis result. She added that it is very important to protect other people at home when diagnosed with influenza or COVID-19.

With similar warnings, Dr. Kirimli explained that it is important to distinguish these diseases from each other by performing tests for treatment: "Right now, we can't even test for the influenza. But if we know what it is, we will give a drug for it. If you don't know what it is, you say 'let's use whatever we have', and that leads to unnecessary use of antibiotics."

“Because we don’t know what we are facing, we may not be able to take precautions for other people at home. It is like living in an older age and trying to treat patients blindly.”

In the spring of 2023, when the World Health Organization formally ended the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency (PHE) declaration and the imperialist states began ending COVID testing and monitoring process and the sharing of information on cases and deaths, Turkey followed suit. Experts are left with only very limited data like hospital admissions and excess deaths.

Prof. Dr. Tu?han Utku, president of the Turkish Intensive Care Association, said in early January that “we felt a little too much pressure in terms of the number of patients. ICU occupancy rates are around 65-70 percent during normal periods. At the moment, we estimate the rate to be around 100 percent”. Utku said that the association had received feedback from colleagues in the field that planned surgeries had to be postponed or canceled for this reason.

Speaking to the BBC, Dr. Hacer Ay?en Yavru, a board member of the Istanbul Chamber of Medicine (ITO), said, “In Istanbul, the province with the highest number of intensive care beds, intensive care units with inadequate infrastructure are opened due to the lack of available beds, but when these are insufficient, intubated patients are monitored on stretchers in the wards, in the red areas of the emergency department.”

Güçlü Yaman, who worked on “excess deaths” in the Pandemic Working Group of the Turkish Medical Association and published several reports, drew attention to increased mortality rates with a post on his X account on January 22. According to Yaman, as of January 19, deaths in Istanbul were 12 percent higher than the 3-year pre-pandemic average. In the week of January 13-19, the average number of excess deaths per day was 32. In the current situation, this equates to about a thousand people per a month in Istanbul alone.

As well as further deaths, millions more people will develop Long COVID, leaving them debilitated and disabled. The “forever COVID” policy also increases the risk that the virus will evolve into more deadly variants.

The ruling elites in Turkey and all over the world ignore the pandemic and disregard public health in order not to disturb their profits. As WSWS stated in

the 2024 New Year’s Statement, “The working class, the fight against capitalist barbarism and the building of the World Party of Socialist Revolution”:

The only way that the pandemic can be stopped is through a globally-coordinated elimination strategy, in which the entire world’s population acts in solidarity and with a collective determination to enforce a broad-based public health program. This strategy must center around mass testing, contact tracing, the safe isolation and treatment of all infected patients, the universal use of high-quality masks, and the renovation of all public buildings to provide clean indoor air through HEPA filters and the safe implementation of Far-UVC devices.

This solution cannot be implemented within the capitalist system. For this reason, the fight against the pandemic is not only a medical problem, but above all a political problem and requires the intervention of the working class on a global scale.



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