

# Millions of Europe's health care workers endangered by government neglect

By Thomas Scripps  
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The death from COVID-19 of a further 2,335 people in Europe on Monday brought the total on the European continent to 26,548. There were 24,334 new cases yesterday, bringing the total to 409,797.

France saw its worst daily toll with 418 deaths, bringing the total to 3,024. After China, Italy and Spain, France has now crossed the 3,000-death threshold. Health agency Director Jerome Salomon reported that 5,107 people were in serious condition requiring life support.

Italy reported an additional 812 deaths, bringing its total to 11,591. Spain reported 812 new deaths, raising its total to 7,340. Britain recorded 180 additional deaths, bringing its total to 1,408. Germany reported 19 new deaths; it has now suffered 560 COVID-19 fatalities.

These totals include many young people and those with no underlying health conditions. Last week, a 16-year-old girl in Paris with no health complications became the virus' youngest victim in Europe. Of the 260 people who died in the UK last Saturday, 13 had no underlying health conditions.

The crisis is taking a particularly heavy toll on woefully under-resourced health care workers fighting on the front lines of the pandemic. This intolerable situation threatens the health and lives of medical staff and their families and the collapse of already overwhelmed health care systems.

In Italy, 8,358 health care workers were reported infected as of yesterday. Sixty-one have died. Doctors Without Borders has sent a team to Codogno in the north of the country to care for hospital workers and support staff.

In Spain, Fernando Simon, the head of the country's emergency coordination centre, said Friday that 9,444 health care workers were infected, up from 3,475 less than a week earlier. This represents 12 percent of current cases. The real numbers are thought to be much higher. At least three medical workers have died.

In the UK, one in four National Health Service (NHS) doctors is ill or self-isolating with sick family members, according to the Royal College of Physicians (RCP). Overall, the RCN found that up to a fifth of *all* front line health staff has been forced to take time off work to self-isolate. Over the weekend, the first two deaths of medical employees were reported. The GMB trade union believes that 4,100 ambulance

workers have also self-isolated, roughly 17 percent of paramedics.

A study published by the prestigious British medical journal *The Lancet* found that in China's Hubei province, the first epicentre of the pandemic, 70 percent of front line health workers suffered extreme levels of stress, 50 percent had depressive disorders, 44 percent had anxiety and 34 percent had insomnia. There have been several reports of suicide by nurses in northern Italy.

Responsibility for the tragedy unfolding in hospitals across Europe lies squarely with the ruling elites, which have failed to provide protection for medical staff. Reports of inadequate supplies and quality of personal protective equipment (PPE) are widespread.

In France, doctors have been taking spare masks from construction sites and factories. Biologist Francois Blanchecott told *France Inter* radio, "We're asking mayors' offices, industries, any enterprises that might have a store of masks."

Alain Colombie, a 61-year-old doctor, posted a photo of himself naked, with the words "cannon fodder" written on an armband, to highlight the lack of protection. Below the photo he wrote, "President Macron, you are asking your little soldiers to go to the front without weapons or defences (masks, gel, over-shirts) and, of course, without consideration."

Colombie explained that he wanted to "come to the defence of the entire family of health care workers." He added, "I denounce a guilty lack of preparation, even though I've been communicating about COVID-19 since the end of January."

Doctors in smaller hospitals in the German capital Berlin have warned of possibly having to close due to a lack of masks, glasses and suits.

Professor Julio Mayol, medical director at the Clinico San Carlos Hospital in Madrid, Spain, said, "It is a bad situation, it is really bad and it is getting worse day by day, because the number of positive COVID-19 patients is increasing.

"We can provide them with more beds, but we need personal protection equipment, and there is a global shortage, and this makes it very difficult for us to send health care workers to battle on the front line without the adequate equipment. ... health care professionals are getting infected. I estimate it could be as many as 25 percent in the near future if we don't do

something.”

Dr. Natalia Silva, from the San Juan de Deu Hospital near Barcelona, told Al Jazeera, “We have to wear masks that we should throw away once they have been used once. Instead, we have to wear them for days. We have also protective glasses that do not fit, and we have to pass them around from one doctor to another.”

The Spanish government has been forced to call up 50,000 additional medical workers, including recent graduates and retired doctors and nurses, to plug the rapidly widening gap.

On Saturday, Richard Horton, editor-in-chief of *The Lancet*, wrote a blistering indictment of the British government’s response to the crisis:

“The NHS (National Health Service) has been wholly unprepared for this pandemic. ... February should have been used to expand coronavirus testing capacity, ensure the distribution of [World Health Organisation]-approved PPE, and establish training programmes and guidelines to protect NHS staff. They didn’t take any of those actions. The result has been chaos and panic across the NHS. Patients will die unnecessarily. NHS staff will die unnecessarily. It is, indeed, as one health worker wrote last week, ‘a national scandal.’ The gravity of that scandal has yet to be understood.”

Horton reprinted a selection of harrowing messages he has been sent by health workers in Britain:

“It’s terrifying for staff at the moment. Still no access to personal protective equipment or testing.”

“It feels as if we are actively harming patients.”

“When I was country director in many conflict zones, we had better preparedness.”

“The hospitals in London are overwhelmed.”

“The public and media are not aware that today we no longer live in a city [London] with a properly functioning western health care system.”

“How will we protect our patients and staff? ... I am speechless. It is utterly unconscionable. How can we do this? It is criminal ... NHS England was not prepared ... We feel completely helpless.”

Despite the Johnson Conservative government’s promises to roll out mass testing of health workers, just 900 NHS staff were tested for COVID-19 over the weekend.

The government distributed a survey to textile manufacturers two weeks ago asking what protective equipment they could make but have made no further contact with the factories that responded. The same factories report receiving pleas from local hospitals for “anything you can make.”

A document leaked Monday showed a stock check carried out by Northern Ireland’s regional health service. It found that 32 of 33 COVID-19-related PPE products were listed as “out of stock.” Some suppliers are warning that protective gear will not be ready until the summer.

Many staff have already been forced to buy their own protective gear or use makeshift equipment. The hashtag

#GetMePPE has been trending on Twitter, and doctors and nurses have set up a crowdsourcing website, “GetUsPPE.org,” to appeal for donations. Over the weekend, Public Health England released guidance on the use of PPE that sets a significantly lower standard than World Health Organisation (WHO) guidance.

Every few days bring new evidence of warnings ignored and preparations not made. In 2017, the UK government’s Department of Health rejected advice from an independent advisory committee recommending “providing eye protection for all hospital, community, ambulance and social care staff who have close contact with pandemic influenza patients.” The committee were told to reconsider and ultimately drop their advice due to “the very large incremental cost of adding in eye protection,” according to minutes of the meeting.

According to the *Guardian*, a July 2019 review of the UK’s biological security strategy focussing on preparations for emerging infectious diseases was postponed and then cancelled. Professor Sir Ian Boyd, a former government adviser involved in writing the strategy, explained, “Getting sufficient resource just to write a decent biosecurity strategy was tough. Getting resource to properly underpin implementation of what it said was impossible.”

The working class is moving to take a stand against this criminal neglect. Following strikes and protests by workers in the United States and in Europe to demand safe working conditions, 500 warehouse workers for British fashion retailer ASOS walked out of a warehouse on Saturday in Barnsley, South Yorkshire to protest against unsafe conditions.

A mass, international campaign must be developed for the closure of all non-essential plants and warehouses and to demand that workers involved in essential production, health and care services above all, be provided with full protective gear by the government and employers. Such measures must be paid for out of the hoarded wealth of the super-rich.

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