

German virologist Hendrik Streeck advocates “herd immunity”

By Markus Salzmann and Peter Schwarz
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Measures to restrict the spread of the coronavirus have been abandoned in stages in Germany and across Europe over recent weeks. Schools and childcare facilities were reopened, while workers were forced to return to unsafe workplaces. At the same time, major outbreaks linked to the easing of restrictions and a lack of coronavirus testing continue to occur.

Last week, the city of Bremerhaven surpassed the guideline of 50 infections per 100,000 inhabitants within a seven-day period, which was agreed upon by the federal and state governments as the trigger for reimposing tougher restrictions. In Göttingen, at least 120 people in a high-rise building have been infected over the past two weeks, including 39 school pupils. The city was forced to close 13 schools and childcare centres, and send 100 pupils into quarantine.

According to Johns Hopkins University, over 7 million people have been infected by the coronavirus globally. With over 185,000 infections and more than 8,700 deaths, Germany remains one of the countries worst affected.

Nonetheless, the dismantling of restrictions is continuing apace. Recently, the Bonn-based virologist Hendrik Streeck even argued in favour of deliberately allowing more infections to occur during the summer months.

According to Streeck, studies show that 81 percent of infections are asymptomatic. Those infected would have no or only very mild symptoms, he said. The hope of a vaccine could prove to be deceptive, he added. So people should be prepared to live with the virus. Since the number of COVID-19 patients in intensive care is in decline, there is “an opportunity for us to increase the number of people with immunity over the summer months.”

This strategy of “herd immunity” has had devastating

consequences in every country where it has been tried out. Behind the United States, Britain and Brazil have the second- and third-highest number of deaths in the world. Swedish epidemiologist Anders Tegnell, who is responsible for the coronavirus response in his country, was forced recently to admit that the refusal to implement lockdown measures led to a catastrophic number of deaths. As the WSWS has explained, the policy of “herd immunity” is a “murderous pseudo-science.”

The fact that Streeck, who is being strongly promoted by media outlets, politicians and business interests, now proposes such a course for Germany shows that the ruling elite is prepared to callously disregard a large loss of human life in order to protect their interests and profits.

Streeck has long sought to downplay the danger of the coronavirus so as to push ahead with the back-to-work drive, reopen schools and childcare facilities and restart other parts of public life. For example, he allowed the publicity agency Storymachine to promote his controversial Heinsberg study, without acknowledging this publicly. Storymachine was founded by long-time editor of the right-wing *Bild* tabloid, Kai Diekmann, and event manager Michael Mronz, the husband of the late Free Democratic Party leader Guido Westerwelle. The agency worked for Streeck for free.

Streeck advocates “herd immunity” even though he is himself forced to admit that there is no scientific basis for it. It is not yet clear whether asymptomatic infections result in immunity or partial immunity, and whether this protects people against reinfection, he told the DPA. “But they do form antibodies to the virus, so one can assume that this at least produces some degree of protection,” he stated.

The federal and state governments are already refusing to implement measures recommended by serious virologists. For example, they advised carrying out comprehensive testing if schools are reopened.

Christian Drosten from Berlin's Charité Hospital recommended testing teachers once a week, even if they showed no symptoms. "The early detection of super-spreading events, which can take place at schools, is very effective," stated Drosten. However, despite the authorities being well aware of the risks bound up with the lifting of restrictions, nowhere near enough tests are being carried out.

While governments justified this in the early stages of the pandemic by saying that inadequate numbers of test kits were available, they are now not being used even though there is capacity to do so. In Germany alone, 1 million tests could be carried out per week for COVID-19. In reality, at the end of May, only a third of this capacity was used, with 340,000 tests conducted per week. The low level of testing keeps the official case numbers low, while the actual number of cases continue to rise and additional fatalities are accepted as a price worth paying.

The federal health ministry has repeatedly declared its intention to test more people, even when no symptoms are exhibited. But this has yet to be implemented in practice. Although reports of outbreaks in slaughterhouses, restaurants and above all hospitals and care homes are piling up, all that is forthcoming is vague declarations of intent.

According to figures from the Robert Koch Institute, close to 13,000 cases of COVID-19 have been registered among employees in hospitals and care homes alone. Of these, 584 workers required hospital treatment, and 20 died. At the beginning of April, the percentage of infected doctors and nurses was 4.3 percent, whereas now it is 7.1 percent.

For Susanne Johna, chair of the Marburger Bund medical council, the thousands infected in the medical field is "highly relevant—because the percentage of medical cases is also increasing." She explained that there have been outbreaks that were triggered by one undetected patient. Johna is therefore demanding that patients taken into hospital and medical staff should be tested. She urgently appealed for the available test capacity to be used.

Personal protective equipment also continues to be in

short supply. While almost all politicians, including Health Minister Spahn, incessantly declare that adequate PPE is available, the reality appears very different.

According to a survey by the Marburger Bund, the largest doctors' association in Germany, 38 percent of doctors stated that they did not have adequate supplies of protective clothing.

"Our survey showed that not only are respiratory masks lacking, but also protective gowns or disinfectant," said Johna. "FFP3 masks—which are used for certain activities in close proximity to the patient—are practically not available at the moment." Due to the lack of supplies, one disposable mask is being used for an entire shift in hospitals, sometimes for several days in a row, said Johna.

Web.de reported on the criticism of a hospital doctor from Fulda. "I feel like we have tested too little," he says. "We only tested patients with strong symptoms because we lacked the resources to isolate them. I don't know, but we probably should have tested a few more people." In addition, there continues to be a lack of PPE.

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