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By Markus Salzmann
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German hospitals become COVID-19 hotspots for health care workers

With nearly 120,000 people in Germany infected with the COVID-19 pathogen, hospitals are increasingly becoming centres of the coronavirus pandemic. According to the public health body the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), more than 2,300 doctors and nurses have become infected in hospitals alone. This is aggravating the dramatic shortage of health care personnel.

The situation is becoming increasingly serious in multiple hospitals. Following an increase in cases of coronavirus infections at the Helios Clinic in Munich-Pasing, operations have now resumed. In addition to patients, many staff were also affected. According to city authorities, around 250 patients and around 1,000 employees have been tested since March 31, 97 of them being positive.

Parts of the hospital in Ansbach, Bavaria have been closed. At the end of last week, a spokesman said that 21 employees from the medical and nursing sector were infected. This number has now more than doubled, the hospital told the *Abendzeitung* on Friday.

At the Ernst-von-Bergmann-Klinikum in Potsdam, five people died within 24 hours as a result of the coronavirus infection, the city of Potsdam announced on Tuesday. Last week, an accumulation of COVID-19 infections was detected in the clinic and admissions were halted. Currently, only acute emergencies may be admitted.

The hospital currently has 88 patients infected with the coronavirus under in-patient treatment, 14 of whom are in intensive care, with 11 being ventilated. By Tuesday, 21 COVID-19 patients had died there.

At least 80 employees have become infected with the virus in the hospital. Experts from the RKI then inspected the clinic and wrote a report to the responsible health authority. Officially, nothing was supposedly known about this, but several proceedings were initiated immediately afterwards.

According to the *Berliner Zeitung*, the first is directed against three senior staff. “On Tuesday evening, administrative offence proceedings were also initiated against two directors of the clinic. Here, too, the accusation is that corona cases may have been reported too late or not at all to the Potsdam health department,” the newspaper writes.

Irrespective of whether individual workers have always observed correct protective measures under these conditions, the root cause of widespread infections lies in the catastrophic conditions in hospitals. Doctors and nursing staff are completely overworked and there is still a lack of protective materials such as face masks, protective gowns and disinfectants.

An open letter from doctors and nursing staff from more than 20 hospitals in Brandenburg makes clear how dramatic the situation is in Germany. They demand action from the Social Democratic Party-led state government to ensure that care can be maintained. “The state of Brandenburg must find a way to produce masks, protective gowns, goggles, gloves and disinfectants—immediately!” says the letter, which is addressed to Prime Minister Dietmar Woidke (SPD) and Health Minister Ursula Nonnenmacher (Greens).

As broadcaster rbb24 reports, employees are demanding more staff for all areas involved in health care “through quick and unbureaucratic recruitment.” Even before the crisis, the situation in hospitals had been precarious; now the health system is facing a crucial test, the letter says.

“The developments of the next days, weeks and months may reveal an unexpected dynamic. If we look at China, Iran, Italy and Spain, we can only guess at what is about to happen in the health care system,” the authors warn.

Moreover, working conditions must be significantly improved, they demand. In addition to the supply of nutritious food, there should also be opportunities for free rehabilitation and physiotherapy in order for staff to be able to continue the mentally and physically stressful work. Employees who themselves belong to risk groups must be given special protection.

The decisions of the past 20 years had been made at the expense of employees and patients, they say, thus clearly criticizing the cuts and privatizations in the hospital sector

as well as throughout the entire health care system. The authors call for a rethinking of the financing of the health system. The logic of the market has no place there, they contend.

The state government in Potsdam reacted to the criticism with the usual indifference and arrogance. Thus, despite the call for help, Nonnenmacher declared on Wednesday in the state parliament's health committee that the hospitals were well prepared for rising case numbers. "All in all, we are well prepared and have a lot of capacity," they said.

By mid-March it had already become clear where the priorities of the Brandenburg state executive lay. While a rescue package for companies amounting to €500 million was announced practically overnight, the government did not take any measures to improve conditions in hospitals.

The contempt that the federal and state governments are showing towards nursing staff in particular is evident in the discussion about premiums for deployment during the crisis. There are still no uniform premiums for employees in hospitals, nursing or handicapped facilities, who are poorly paid anyway. While hypocritical campaigns are waged for the "everyday heroes," the federal and state governments undercut each other with their proposals that amount to mere alms.

Doctors and nurses at the state-owned Charité and Vivantes hospitals in Berlin, for example, are to receive €150 more for three months. Bavaria wants to pay a one-time payment of €500 to nurses. The trade union Verdi has agreed with the Federal Association of Employers in the Nursing Industry (BVAP) on a one-time payment of €1,500 for full-time employees. However, large employers, such as church-run health institutions and private providers, are not represented here.

Although RKI boss Lothar Wieler repeatedly declared "that capacities will not be sufficient," hospitals have already been closed in the midst of the crisis, further reducing capacity. They may not be the last. As weekly *Die Zeit* reported, six out of 10 hospitals in Southern Germany alone are chronically underfinanced; 78 percent of public hospitals are in debt.

Last year, the Bertelsmann Foundation published a study, according to which the number of hospitals in Germany should be reduced by half to only 600. At the end of February, health minister Jens Spahn (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) had called for "more courage" in closing hospitals, according to the medical journal *Ärzteblatt*.

Infections are also increasing in nursing homes. Across Germany, the coronavirus has now appeared in more than 300 residences. At least 226 residents have died of COVID-19 so

far, 118 in North Rhine-Westphalia. This was shown by a survey by *FAKT* magazine among the responsible ministries of all German federal states, whereby Saarland and Saxony-Anhalt did not provide any information. Due to insufficient testing, however, the real numbers are likely to be much higher.

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