



Search
No Results

Search
No Results

Medscape

Thursday, March 26, 2020
[News & Perspective](#) [Drugs & Diseases](#) [CME & Education](#) [Academy](#) [Consult](#) [Video](#)

[Perspective](#) > [Medscape UK](#)

COVID-19: What Can the World Learn From Italy?

Daniela Ovadia
March 13, 2020

1

[ADD TO EMAIL ALERTS](#)

COVID-19 appeared in Italy on January 30th. A couple of Chinese tourists coming from Wuhan via Beijing were admitted to Spallanzani Hospital in Rome, highly specialised in infectious diseases.

The same day, the Minister of Health Roberto Speranza announced an air traffic embargo for flights coming to Italy from any Chinese city, including the autonomous regions of Hong Kong and Macau, in an attempt to block the spread of the infection.

In the days following the hospitalisation of the Chinese couple in Rome, a few new cases were detected in a group of Italians who were repatriated from the Wuhan region. Experts started to sigh in relief as all cases came from abroad and no local contagion seemed to show up.

The Alarm in the Middle of the Night

Then, quite abruptly, on February 20th at midnight, the Councillor for Welfare in Lombardy, Giulio Gallera, announced that Mattia, a 38-year-old Italian from the small city of Codogno, in Lombardy, was hospitalised for a severe case of atypical pneumonia and tested positive for coronavirus. He had not travelled to China nor had any contact with people coming from Asia. He was tested only because a young anaesthesiologist, faced with the worsening condition of the patient, broke

protocol and asked for permission to test a patient with no apparent risk factors. Codogno was the focus of a local outbreak of the disease: new cases were identified in the following days and the whole area was put under strict quarantine for 2 weeks. But it was too late.

As of March 12th, Italy has 15,113 official cases, 1016 deaths and 1258 recovered patients. The whole country is on lockdown. Cities like Milan and Bergamo, in Lombardy, are facing an exponential growth of hospitalised people with COVID-19. Schools, universities, and most shops are closed (all except the ones selling basic goods like food, drugs, electronics, and warehouses) and the National Health System is trying to cope with the flood of patients needing ventilation support. Roberto Cosentini, head of the Emergency Department at Pope John XXIII Hospital in Bergamo, one of the most affected cities, has been living in the hospital for the last 3 weeks: "It's like a wave," he says. "We have now around 60-80 new COVID-19 patients per day coming to the emergency. Most of them are in severe conditions and they arrive all together between 4 and 6 pm. We learnt that the respiratory distress worsens at the end of the afternoon and we now know that we will have to deal with most of the severe cases showing up one after another in a short time, every day." But Italy learnt from the Chinese experience: Italian experts looked at Wuhan's management of the crisis and Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio asked his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi for assistance with supplies. Other countries in Europe are looking at Italy in order to prepare for SARS-CoV-2, the virus which causes COVID-19.

Adjusting the Testing Strategy

"There is a huge debate about the way we test for the SARS-CoV-2 virus," explains Giovanni Maga, director of the Institute of Molecular Genetics of the Italian National Research Council in Pavia, in Lombardy. "Many countries test only people with symptoms. At the beginning of the crisis, we decided to test everyone who was in contact with a person infected with the virus and this is what WHO also recommends. But in the long run it became impossible and now we test only symptomatic people with severe impairment."

However, this makes the analysis of the epidemic trends quite challenging. "If you test everybody, you will find more positive cases, with mild symptoms," says Maga. The strategy for testing might heavily influence the visible part of the epidemic: "According to many epidemiologists, other countries could be in the same situation as Italy was a few weeks ago," continues Maga. "But since they do not check asymptomatic people, they just don't know it." The choice of testing strategies is a crucial one for preparedness. "There are pros and cons for any choice, but what is important is to try to be as consistent as possible on the criteria since the beginning of the outbreak," he says.

19 [Read Comments](#)



[Next](#)

© 2020 WebMD, LLC
Send comments and news tips to uknewsdesk@medscape.net.

Cite this: COVID-19: What Can the World Learn From Italy? - Medscape - Mar 13, 2020.

What to Read Next on Medscape

BUSINESS OF MEDICINE