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WORLD | EUROPE

Italy, With Aging Population, Has World's Highest Daily Deaths From Virus

Coronavirus has killed 5% of known cases, even higher in the worst-affected region, versus a global average of 3.5%



A health worker wearing a protective suit and a face mask on Monday exited a tent set up outside a hospital in Brescia, Italy, where people are undergoing tests for Coronavirus.

PHOTO: FILIPPO VENEZIA/SHUTTERSTOCK

By *Margherita Stancati*

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ROME—The coronavirus has killed more people in Italy than in China over the past week. Doctors are warning that a shortage of beds to treat the severely ill could push the Italian death toll higher still.

In less than three weeks, Italy has gone from having just three coronavirus cases to the biggest outbreak after China. And the data point to a troubling trend: Those infected in Italy appear more likely to die.

Incomplete data, especially on total infections, makes mortality rates uncertain at this point in the global epidemic. But Italy's high number of deaths has health experts worried. Many say that, if Italians are more likely to die, then demographics are probably a big part of the reason.

By Monday, Italy's total confirmed infections reached 9,172 of whom 463, or 5%, had died. In Lombardy, the worst-affected region, the death rate is 6%. Globally, about 3.5% out of 109,578 people with confirmed cases have died, according to the latest data from the World Health Organization. Many experts say the real mortality rate may well be lower, because many infection cases aren't known.

"From a biological point of view, it's inexplicable," said Giorgio Palù, a virologist at the University of Padua. "The only thing we know for sure is that Italy's population is one of the oldest in the world."

Global data on the lethality of the new virus show that the elderly are much more likely to succumb to Covid-19, the respiratory disease caused by the virus, than the young.

In Italy, which has the oldest population in the world after Japan, 58% of Covid-19 patients who died so far were over 80 years old, and a further 31% were in their 70s, according to the National Institute of Health, Italy's disease-control agency.

"If we break it down by age group, our death rates are similar, or even lower, than those reported in China," Giovanni Rezza, the institute's chief epidemiologist, told reporters on Monday. "For better or for worse, we have a very old population."



A health worker helped a patient outside a tent by a hospital in Brescia.

PHOTO: FILIPPO VENEZIA/SHUTTERSTOCK

In contrast, South Korea—another developed country, with an outbreak nearly the size of Italy's—has a mortality rate of just 0.7%. South Korea's reported deaths mirror the demographics seen elsewhere: The elderly and those with pre-existing illness dominate. But South Korea's more than 7,000 confirmed cases trends young, with about four-fifths of virus patients under the age of 60.

Italy's testing policy also contributes to a higher ratio of deaths compared with known infections, said Mr. Rezza. Italy has so far tested around 54,000 people, but is focusing tests on those with clear symptoms and known contacts with high-risk areas. That means many people who carry the virus but have mild or no symptoms aren't being tested.

In contrast, South Korea ramped up mass testing soon after discovering its outbreak and hunted down those likely infected. Empowered by a broad infectious-disease law, the country's health officials had access to an individual's credit-card transactions, smartphone data and security-camera footage. South Korea's government said it could test up to 10,000 people a day, erecting drive-through clinics and repurposing other medical facilities.

Now, Italy is racing against time to slow down the spread of the virus before it overwhelms its health-care system, leading to far more deaths.

In Lombardy, health authorities are scrambling to add new beds for the severely ill, postponing nonessential surgery and creating makeshift intensive care wards. Most of the region's 150 hospitals are now focused on treating Covid-19 patients.

But the number of sick is rising faster than the number of beds. In the worst-hit areas, doctors say that if new infections continue to increase at the current rate—by around 25% each day—hospitals may run out of beds within a week to treat all those who need intensive care. Around 60% of those in intensive care in Lombardy are over 65.

"It's a titanic effort. The health-care system is holding up. But it can only continue to do so if infections decline," said Ivano Riva, an intensive-care doctor in Bergamo, a city in Lombardy at the heart of the epidemic.

He warned that, short of a vaccine, the only real solution to the health-care emergency lies outside hospitals.

"Keeping people away from each other and staying at home is as crucial as medical intervention. If not, we risk a health-care catastrophe," said Dr. Riva, who represents Lombardy's union of anesthesiologists and intensive-care doctors. "I hope the population understands that."

Lombardy hasn't yet reached the point where doctors are having to choose who gets intensive care and who doesn't, said Alessandro Vergallo, who heads the intensive-care doctors' union. "For now, we are performing acrobatics in order to manage," he said. "If things carry on like this, it's clear our capacity to resist is limited."

Lombardy has already begun transferring some intensive-care patients to other regions.

Virologists say the coronavirus began spreading in towns southeast of Milan for about a month before it was detected on Feb. 20. Since then, new infections have continued to rise rapidly despite a first raft of measures aimed at restricting public gatherings.

That pushed the government to take drastic steps to curb the epidemic, with Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte on Monday saying the whole of Italy will be placed in lockdown from Tuesday, extending measures that were recently imposed on the country's north. People are barred from leaving the quarantined areas unless they can prove necessity. Those who break the rules can face up to three months in prison.

Across Italy, schools, cinemas and museums have shut, and bars and restaurants must shut after 6 p.m.

"I'm aware that this is serious," said Mr. Conte. "But I have to intervene even more decisively to protect us all, especially those who are weaker and more vulnerable."

The national government is worried that Lombardy's health-care crisis could expand to the whole of Italy. To prepare for that, the government is buying thousands of new ventilators and has instructed health care officials across the country to expand by 50% the number of beds in intensive care units, of which there are currently around 5,000. Over 700 of them are already occupied by Covid-19 patients.

A bigger problem is personnel: There aren't enough specialized doctors and nurses to staff intensive-care units. Intensive care wards across the country were already some 3,000 doctors short before the coronavirus outbreak, according to the union that represents them.

Doctors and nurses who are already dealing with the Covid-19 emergency are stretched to the limit, working overtime and often getting sick themselves. In Lombardy, medical staff make up around 12% of those infected.

"It's like a war erupted and we are fighting battles day and night," Daniele Macchini, a doctor in Lombardy, said in a Facebook post on March 7, appealing to the public. "We are just trying to be useful. Now, you should try doing your part, too."

Write to Margherita Stancati at margherita.stancati@wsj.com

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