

Coronavirus generates rash of swindlers in Italy

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From jacking-up the prices of disinfectant gel to scammers posing as Red Cross volunteers, Italy's battle to contain its coronavirus outbreak has been a gift to grifters of various stripes.

After a spike in confirmed cases in recent days, Italy's number of infections now stands at 283, by far the largest in Europe.

Most of them are in the northern region of Lombardy, which contains the country's economic capital Milan.

Worried residents in the north have been scrambling to get hold of face masks and disinfectant gels, leading to shortages in many pharmacies and supermarkets.

The less scrupulous have been quick to spy an opportunity to profit.

On Tuesday morning one vendor on Ebay was asking for no less than 300 euros (325 dollars) for a litre of disinfectant solution.

The equivalent product for babies was by comparison a bargain at a mere 240 euros.

The phenomenon has prompted a wave of jokes and memes on [social media](#).

"Will exchange five litres of Amuchina (antibacterial gel) in return for

an Audi RS 5 car from 2019," runs one, adding: "If it's a 2016 model, throw in 65,000 euros."

Another joke imagines a drug dealer asking a buyer if they want cannabis or cocaine only for the client to respond: "Amuchina gel."

But the Codacons consumer association does not see the funny side of the rise in [prices](#) for such products to what it calls "astronomical levels".

Amuchina has seen a whopping 650 percent price rise from three euros to 22.50 for an 80ml bottle, while Codacons says masks are now going for 1.80 euros—as opposed to just 10 cents before the onset of consumer panic.

The association says one lot of five masks fitted with valves were marketed on Amazon as "perfect for coronavirus" for 189 euros.

'Charlatans'

Codacons blasts such offers as "shameful speculation trying to profit from people's fears".

The association has filed a complaint with police and prosecutors in Rome demanding the closure of the pages.

"If the giants of online trading aren't automatically taking down pages dealing in this sort of speculation, they are making themselves complicit in this swindle," it said.

Prosecutors in Milan are already investigating possible "speculative manoeuvres" on the part of both on- and offline traders, for example in the hoarding of certain products to drive up prices.

"We're currently weighing up the possibility of introducing rules to rein in the prices of masks and disinfectants, in order to prevent unjustified price rises," deputy Economy Minister Laura Castelli.

An even darker phenomenon has been thieves passing themselves off as Red Cross volunteers or members of the civil protection and health services.

Gaining access to people's homes on the pretext of testing them for contamination, they aim to steal money or jewellery.

The Red Cross and the civil protection agency have had to make clear that they are not going door-to-door to do any such checks and have called on Italians to be "careful" and to alert the police if confronted with the scam.

Then there are those offering so-called miracle cures.

"Certain homoeopathic or naturopathic products are offered on the internet with the claim that they can prevent coronavirus infections or cure them," Pier Luigi Lopalco, professor of hygiene and preventative medicine at the University of Pisa, told AFP.

"These products are not effective," he says, branding those offering them "charlatans".

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