

Belgian hospital braces for cresting virus wave

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The Erasmus hospital in Brussels is on a war footing.

Dozens of beds are lined up at a triage centre alongside accident and emergency, ahead of what Belgium fears will be its turn to face the worst of the coronavirus epidemic.

Lying at a crossroads of Europe and with a population of 11.4 million, Belgium already has one of the worst outbreaks in per capita terms, with 220 coronavirus deaths.

Health officials, nervously watching the devastating progress of the disease in Spain and Italy, can not yet predict when the wave of infections will peak, but perhaps in "the coming weeks".

At Erasmus, as at other large hospitals in the country, medical staff are following the [exponential growth](#) in new cases closely and making preparations to prevent their wards from being overwhelmed.

"Today, we have the impression that this growth remains under control," said Dr. Jean-Michel Hougardy, director of Erasmus, a 1,000-bed teaching [hospital](#) in the south of the Belgian capital.

"We'll certainly encounter problems over the course of the epidemic... but we'll do everything necessary to cope with the situation if it gets worse," he said.

Erasmus has set up two specialised units to treat COVID-19 patients, one with 15 beds and another with 29—but they are already dealing with 69 patients and more space is being set aside.

Another 16 cases are so serious the patients are in the [intensive care unit](#).

"We could receive more. We're adapting in a dynamic fashion as new arrivals come. We're accelerating the already planned refurbishment of some units, said spokeswoman Pauline Mignon.

Alongside hospital staff, Red Cross volunteers have joined the teams to help run the triage centre sorting patients arriving at A&E.

Red ticket, green ticket

As worried citizens arrive fearing they may have been infected the first step is that they must thoroughly disinfect their hands, then they fill in a questionnaire.

If their symptoms give the slightest reason for concern they are issued a red ticket that gives them quick access to a doctor.

Those who receive a green ticket are deemed at low risk of having the novel COVID-19 coronavirus strain that has swept the world, and can proceed to the [emergency department](#) in the normal way.

As Dr. Stephane Debaize explains, the idea of this dual stage process is to prevent a localised epidemic within the hospital, by quickly separating patients with and without the virus.

Even with the separation, frontline [medical staff](#) remain exposed, and Erasmus employees have been as frustrated as colleagues elsewhere by country-wide shortages of vital protective equipment.

"Protecting care-givers is essential and it's not just a question of masks," Hougardy says, citing Belgium's slow progress in finding test kits to quickly identify [coronavirus](#) sufferers.

On Wednesday, Prime Minister Sophie Wilmes' government—formed solely to fight the outbreak—announced that it hoped to pass from 2,000 to 10,000 daily tests "in the days to come".

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