

Italy's health system at limit in virus-struck Lombardy

March 2 2020, by Nicole Winfield and Colleen Barry



A paramedic walks out of a tent that was set up in front of the emergency ward of the Cremona hospital, northern Italy, Saturday, Feb. 29, 2020. A U.S. government advisory urging Americans to reconsider travel to Italy due to the spread of a new virus is the "final blow" to the nation's tourism industry, the head of Italy's hotel federation said Saturday. (Claudio Furlan/Lapresse via AP)

The coronavirus outbreak in northern Italy has so overwhelmed the public health system there that officials are taking extraordinary measures to care for the sick, seeking to bring doctors out of retirement and accelerate graduation dates for nursing students.

The region of Lombardy has been the epicenter of Italy's outbreak, registering the first positive test and now counting 984 of Italy's 1,694 cases. Most alarmingly, 10% of Lombardy's doctors and nurses are out of commission, because they tested positive for the virus and are in quarantine, said the region's top health official, Giulio Gallera.

With officials saying they expect Italy's numbers to continue rising for at least another week, until containment measures begin to take effect, the health care emergency in Lombardy has reached a crisis point. Already, hospitals in hard-hit Lodi and Cremona were overwhelmed at times last week, with more patients arriving than could be accepted.

"Effectively some of the hospitals in Lombardy are under a stress that is much heavier than what this area can support and has trained for for years, to face this type of emergency," Dr. Massimo Galli, head of infectious disease at Milan's Sacco Hospital, told Sky TG24. "This epidemic is on a scale that is larger than anyone could have thought, imagined or prevented."



Paramedics work in a tent that was set up outside the hospital of Cremona, northern Italy, Saturday, Feb. 29, 2020. A U.S. government advisory urging Americans to reconsider travel to Italy due to the spread of a new virus is the "final blow" to the nation's tourism industry, the head of Italy's hotel federation said Saturday. (Claudio Furlan/Lapresse via AP)

Lombardy's regional government has asked the central government to reactivate retired doctors and nurses and get them back on the payroll. In addition, nursing students who were due to take their [final exams](#) next month are now expected to graduate in the coming days so they can be immediately put to work, Gallera said.

In addition, [private hospitals](#) in Lombardy have offered up beds in intensive care units and more than a dozen doctors from the [private](#)

[sector](#) have agreed to work in public hospitals to ease the crisis, regional president Attilio Fontana said.

Underscoring the emergency, Fontana himself has been in quarantine for several days after one of his top aides tested positive for the virus. A second member of the regional government tested positive Monday, Gallera said. Fontana has been working and sleeping out of his office, appearing at each day's virus briefing via video.



A paramedic wearing a mask gets out of a tent set up by the Italian Civil Protection outside the emergency ward of the Piacenza hospital, northern Italy, Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020. Italy is changing how it reports coronavirus cases and who will get tested in ways that could lower the country's caseload even as an outbreak centered in northern Italy spreads in Europe. (Claudio Furlan/Lapresse via AP)



Personnel who perform security checks at the entrance of the Duomo gothic cathedral wear face masks as the Duomo reopened to the public after being closed due to the COVID-19 virus outbreak in northern Italy, in Milan, Monday, March 2, 2020. Churches in much of Veneto and Lombardy, two of regions hardest hit by the virus, have closed their doors under widespread measures aimed at containing the spread of the virus. (Claudio Furlan/LaPresse via AP)



A tourist wearing a face mask takes pictures inside the Duomo gothic cathedral as it reopened to the public after being closed due to the COVID-19 virus outbreak in northern Italy, in Milan, Monday, March 2, 2020. Churches in much of Veneto and Lombardy, two of regions hardest hit by the virus, have closed their doors under widespread measures aimed at containing the spread of the virus. (Claudio Furlan/LaPresse via AP)



A tourist wearing a face mask takes pictures inside the Duomo gothic cathedral as it reopened to the public after being closed due to the COVID-19 virus outbreak in northern Italy, in Milan, Monday, March 2, 2020. Churches in much of Veneto and Lombardy, two of regions hardest hit by the virus, have closed their doors under widespread measures aimed at containing the spread of the virus. (Claudio Furlan/LaPresse via AP)



A tourist wearing a face mask stands by the ticket office of the Duomo gothic cathedral museum complex as it reopened to the public after being closed due to the COVID-19 virus outbreak in northern Italy, in Milan, Monday, March 2, 2020. Churches in much of Veneto and Lombardy, two of regions hardest hit by the virus, have closed their doors under widespread measures aimed at containing the spread of the virus. (Claudio Furlan/LaPresse via AP)

Lombardy and Veneto have been two of the hardest-hit regions in Italy, and over the weekend the United States issued a travel advisory warning American citizens against visiting. While schools remained closed Monday, at least one sign of life returned to normal, with Milan's Duomo cathedral reopening to tourists.

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