

Madrid hotel transformed into coronavirus hospital

March 19 2020

Doctors wearing face masks on Thursday welcomed patients to a four-star Madrid hotel which was transformed into a care facility for people with mild cases of coronavirus.

The 359-room Gran Hotel Colon is the first in Spain to be repurposed to treat people infected with the virus but the regional government of Madrid plans to turn more empty hotels into healthcare facilities over the coming days.

This will help "alleviate the pressure" on hospitals which are starting to become overcrowded and free up beds for more seriously ill patients, the regional government of Madrid said in a statement.

A steady stream of ambulances transported patients to the Gran Hotel Colon, which is in the centre of Madrid, about a 10-minute walk from the Gregorio Maranon hospital, one of the Spanish capital's biggest.

Medical staff wearing white protective suits, face masks and gloves then began escorting patients inside the building under the glare of TV cameras which were kept at a distance.

"A week ago we could never imagine this," Angela Perez, a 45-year-old area resident, said as she walked by with her shopping trolley along the deserted streets of the city which, like the rest of the country, has been in lockdown since Saturday to prevent the spread of the virus.

Another four-star Madrid hotel, the Marriott Auditorium, is scheduled to start receiving patients on Friday.

Hoteliers have offered regional authorities the use of a total of 40 hotels in the Madrid region with 9,000 beds to treat coronavirus patients, according to Madrid's main hotel association.

The hotels will be used to house patients "whose symptoms require medical attention without the need to be hospitalised, both at the start of the disease as well as during the final phase," the regional government statement said.

Spain on Thursday announced that deaths from the novel coronavirus had jumped by nearly 30 percent over the past 24 hours to 767, while the total number of confirmed cases of the disease jumped by around 25 percent to 17,147.

Madrid accounts for 40 percent of the total infections in Spain and two-thirds of the deaths.

Spain has the fourth-highest number of confirmed cases of the virus in the world after China, Italy and Iran and many of its hotels are being emptied by the pandemic.

'Not enough beds'

The hotels will be staffed by young doctors who have yet to earn their specialisation.

Elena Guijarro, a 25-year-old physiotherapist whose father died on Wednesday from coronavirus and whose mother and brother are being treated for the disease at the Gregorio Maranon hospital, said turning the hotel into a care facility would help.

"They are doing their best at the hospital. But more and more people are being hospitalised and there are not enough beds for all the sick people," she added.

As the pandemic spreads, officials around the world from New York City to Berlin are weighing converting entire hotels into hospitals for patients with COVID-19 in an effort to increase capacity at medical facilities.

But not everyone agreed with the move. Spain's largest trade union confederation, the CCOO, argues the government should instead use the thousands of beds that are available in private hospitals and boost funding for public hospitals.

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Citation: Madrid hotel transformed into coronavirus hospital (2020, March 19) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-03-madrid-hotel-coronavirus-hospital.html>

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