

Short on protective gear, Russian medics fear infecting patients

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With Russian medical workers often forced to make or buy their own protective equipment, Olga was not surprised when a fellow doctor at her clinic in the Moscow suburbs tested positive for the coronavirus.

"We'd all been in contact with her but management didn't quarantine anyone," said Olga, a doctor at a polyclinic in the Moscow satellite town of Mytishchi.

"If they'd put us in quarantine, there would have been no one left to work."

As the number of [coronavirus](#) cases across Russia grows, doctors, nurses and other [medical staff](#)—especially outside Moscow—are worried that instead of helping people during the pandemic, they are infecting them.

Shortages of protective equipment and an apparent unwillingness to test medical staff are putting patients at risk, medics and union officials told AFP, and some are beginning to speak out.

"We are given one disposable mask per day—but you are supposed to change them every two hours," said Olga, who asked that her real name not be used.

As of Wednesday and after days of steady increases, Russia had nearly 58,000 confirmed coronavirus cases and 513 deaths, while claiming one of the highest testing rates in the world with 2.2 million carried out.

Mytishchi is experiencing one of Russia's largest per capita outbreaks. With 302 cases for a population of 223,000, the town's infection rate is more than three times the national average.

Yet [personal protective equipment](#) (PPE) is in scarce supply, even for frontline medical workers, said Olga.

"We're forced to buy masks ourselves—as well as gloves—or else sew them ourselves."

As for the protective white suits worn by many medics to treat highly infectious patients, Olga said she has never seen one.

She is simply trying to boost her [immune system](#) by drinking tea with ginger and lemon.

"That's all I can do," she said, adding that such conditions make medics themselves prime transmitters of the virus.

'Expecting the worst'

Such a situation is only too common, said Andrei Konoval, co-president of doctors' trade union Action.

He pointed to "a lack of protective equipment in hospitals in practically every Russian region," adding that facilities often avoid testing medics because they are afraid of losing staff.

Ivan Konovalov, a representative of the Doctors' Alliance, an opposition-linked trade union, told AFP he had received "dozens of complaints from doctors who say their management is refusing to test staff."

The situation is little better in Russia's second-largest city of Saint Petersburg, home to five million people.

Pyotr, an intensive care doctor, told AFP that shortages of PPE were so overwhelming that "hospital management has said we won't get any more" deliveries.

"The Russian medical community is expecting the worst," said the doctor, who asked not to use his last name.

In a letter of complaint to officials seen by AFP, doctors at Saint

Petersburg's Pokrovskaya hospital accused management of failing to clearly mark and separate "red zones" used for infectious patients from clean "green zones".

A total of 27 patients and five staff medics have been infected with the virus, they said.

An anaesthetist at the hospital, Sergei Sayapin, said in a video posted online that he had been forced to buy his own PPE.

"Management hasn't done anything to stop staff getting infected," he said. "If I fall ill or some other staff member does, the head doctor will be responsible."

A total of 137 medics have been hospitalised with the virus at the city's Botkin hospital, its chief doctor said last week, quoted by news agency TASS.

In the Urals city of Yekaterinburg, 91 people have been infected at a single hospital, including 16 doctors, TASS reported.

As Russia's richest and best-equipped city, Moscow appears to be better placed than other regions, although hospitals have also had problems with acquiring kit.

Promises from Putin

Russia has had to adapt quickly to the pandemic, just like other countries around the world. But here, the crisis strikes a [health system](#) already weakened by decades of under-funding and controversial reforms that reduced staffing levels.

Russia has not put any figure on PPE shortages but the Kremlin has

acknowledged there are "regions where reserves of personal protective equipment are insufficient."

The health ministry did not answer a question from AFP on how many health workers have been infected with the coronavirus.

President Vladimir Putin promised doctors "high-quality and effective protection" during a televised conference call on Monday.

He said Russia will soon be producing 3.5 million surgical masks annually, 280,000 respirator masks and 100,000 protective suits—two or three times more than before the epidemic began.

The health ministry says it has already made available two-thirds of the 95,000 new beds planned to accommodate virus patients by the end of the month.

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