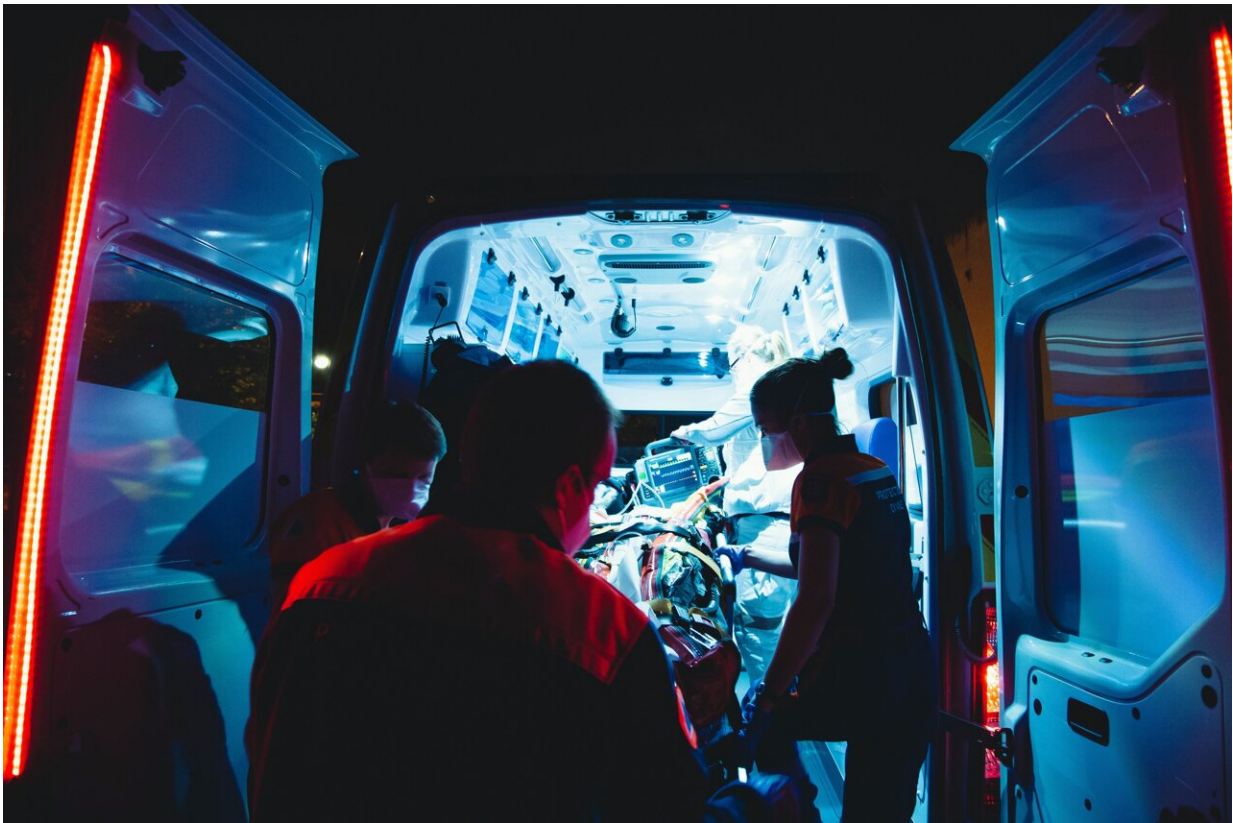


# Virus surge overwhelms Barcelona hospital staff

August 6 2021

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Staff in the intensive care unit at Barcelona's Hospital del Mar are battling exhaustion as they grapple with a new surge in COVID-19 patients that is straining the region's health system.

Ten new intensive care beds have been added at this one [hospital](#) alone, bringing the total to 30.

All of them are full—and it is overwhelmingly unvaccinated, and younger, patients who are occupying them.

Nurses decked out in protective green gowns, face masks and gloves, dart from one bed to another in the hospital overlooking the Mediterranean—where just weeks before young people had been partying following the lifting of virus restrictions.

Electronic beeps alert them to the patients' different needs as they fight for their lives, many of them on ventilators.

"The situation is critical, it is more like the first wave, and we are overwhelmed," said ICU nurse supervisor, Desiree Ruiz.

"The [staff](#) are exhausted. There are those who needed psychological help."

Spain's northeastern region of Catalonia, of which Barcelona is the capital, is the epicentre of a fifth wave of coronavirus infections that is being driven by the more contagious Delta variant.

As of Thursday, 637 COVID-19 patients were in [intensive care](#) in Catalonia—compared with 1,925 in the whole of Spain.

And nearly half of the region's ICU beds are occupied by a COVID-19 patient, more than twice the national average.

## 'Breaking point'

The jump in cases follows the end of a nationwide night-time curfew in

May and the end of a law in June requiring the use of face masks outdoors.

Images of large groups of youths gathering on Barcelona's beaches, including one in front of the Hospital del Mar, have angered [hospital staff](#).

"It caught us by surprise. We expected a rise in infections with the measures which were taken... but we did not expect a rise of these dimensions," said doctor Antonia Vazquez, one of the heads of hospital's ICU.

Last month, the region of around 7.8 million people on the border with France reimposed virus restrictions, such as nightly curfews, to try to rein in the surge in infections, especially among [unvaccinated young people](#).

While the infection rate has started to inch down, it will take time to be felt in [intensive care unit](#) where patients need round-the-clock care for staff who have been battling the pandemic for a year-and-a-half now.

In one bed, a woman in her 20s rested, a photo at her side of her newborn baby who was delivered by caesarean section.

The surge in cases, along with a shortage of staff as hospital workers go on summer leave, is taking its toll on morale.

"During the first wave no one for a moment thought of quitting, but now more and more people say 'if I could I would leave now and never come back'," Vazquez said. "Everyone is at breaking point."

## **Younger patients**

The surge in infections has come as health workers began taking their summer holidays, leaving the hospital with fewer staff.

"We went from having 10 COVID patients in the hospital one week to having 150," said the hospital's chief medical officer, Miguel Pera.

Finding staff for the extra COVID-19 patient beds was "complicated".

Catalonia's health department has cancelled all non-essential surgery in order to free up hospital staff.

The average age of COVID-19 patients in the hospital's ICU has dropped to around 50 from 60-65 during the first wave of the pandemic last year.

The vast majority of the COVID-19 patients on the ICU had not been fully vaccinated, either because they chose not too or because it was not yet their turn.

But unlike during the first wave last year, the number of deaths remains low, thanks to the availability of vaccines.

Spain's vaccination programme has worked through age groups meaning younger people only recently starting to get jabs.

Nearly 60 percent of Spain's population is fully vaccinated against COVID-19, one of the highest rates in Europe.

"The vaccine has had a very important protective effect, without it the situation would have been much harder," said Pera.

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