

Italian hospitals under strain as Covid hits new highs

December 30 2021

"We are inundated," Antonino Marchese says wearily as his Rome COVID hospital fills up with patients, most of them unvaccinated despite tougher restrictions for Italians who are not jabbed.

As daily coronavirus infections in Italy hit new highs, [hospital admissions](#) across the country are surging once again due to the new Omicron variant and the persisting reluctance among some to get vaccinated.

At Rome's Casalpallocco COVID hospital, the situation has been serious for about a month, medical director Marchese told AFP.

Of the facility's 120 beds, 111 are filled by virus-stricken patients.

"We are inundated with requests for admission. It's a constant pressure," said Marchese, adding that he feared numbers would rise even higher.

Almost three-quarters of the hospital's COVID patients are unvaccinated, and some resist intubation when taken to the [intensive care unit](#).

"Then they generally accept because they realise how serious it is and then they can no longer breathe on their own," he said.

The majority of patients in [intensive care](#) are elderly, but younger people also fill up beds "because they have to be constantly and precisely

monitored to see if they need to be ventilated", Marchese said.

Throughout Italy hospitals are seeing a similar phenomenon.

Whereas 10 percent of intensive care beds were occupied by COVID patients on December 17, that number has crept up to 13 percent in the past two days, according to Italy's National Agency for Regional Health Services.

Some regions are under even more pressure, such as Veneto, at 18 percent, and Lazio—of which Rome is the capital—at 16 percent.

Although 85.8 percent of the country's population over the age of 12 has been fully inoculated, there remain roughly six million unvaccinated over-12s, according to official data.

"In my opinion, in Italy we've managed to steer the population towards a certain favourable vaccination trend," said Marchese.

"Of course, the no-vax people exist everywhere, even here."

Twisting arms

To try to convince them further, Italy's government on Wednesday announced even more stringent restrictions on the unvaccinated, effectively barring them from hotels, gyms, restaurants and even public transport.

From January 10, a new "reinforced" health pass—which shows proof of vaccination status or recovery from COVID-19—will be required to access many places previously accessible to the unjabbed through a negative COVID test.

The new curbs, aimed at encouraging more people to get vaccinated, come as Italy posted a record 126,888 daily cases on Thursday.

The government also scrapped a 10-day quarantine requirement for fully vaccinated people who come into contact with a positive case, in a bid to stem the wave of asymptomatic employees forced to stay home.

There was also increasing speculation the government would impose a vaccination requirement—currently for those in frontline positions such as teachers, medics and police—for all jobs.

Back at the hospital, patient Roberto Cassina had already spent more than three weeks being cared for.

The unvaccinated 53-year-old said he was not even aware that he had COVID until "the situation degenerated and I went into [respiratory failure](#)".

While calling the [hospital](#) doctors and nurses his "guardian angels", Cassina said he was still on the fence over whether he would eventually get jabbed.

Across the hall, however, 75-year-old Gianpaolo Coin said he would not hesitate to get vaccinated, confessing to have been "very afraid" after contracting COVID.

"My wife and I, we thought we were going to die."

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