As omicron spreads, Europe scrambles to shore up health care

January 7 2022, by Mike Corder

An ambulance for covid emergency unload a patient at the Cervello hospital in Palermo, Sicily, where tented field hospitals have been set up in front of three hospitals to relieve the pressure on the emergency room and allow ambulances to get their patients into a bed rather than wait in line in the parking lot, Friday, Jan. 7, 2022. Sicily has seen its caseload double in recent days, from around 6,000 a day to 14,000 on Thursday, and has just under 1,000 people hospitalized with the virus. Credit: Alberto Lo Bianco/LaPresse via AP

Troops have been deployed to London hospitals. Health care workers infected with COVID-19 are treating patients in France. The Netherlands is under a lockdown, and tented field hospitals have gone up in Sicily.

Nations across Europe are scrambling to prop up health systems strained by staff shortages blamed on the new, highly transmissible omicron variant of the coronavirus, which is sending a wave of infections crashing over the continent.

"Omicron means more patients to treat and fewer staff to treat them," Stephen Powis, national medical director at Britain's National Health Service, said Friday.

The World Health Organization said Thursday that a record 9.5 million COVID-19 cases were tallied globally over the last week, a 71% increase from the previous 7-day period. However, the number of weekly recorded deaths declined.

While omicron seems less severe than the delta variant it has swiftly replaced, especially among people who have been vaccinated, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus cautioned against treating it lightly.

"Just like previous variants, omicron is hospitalizing people, and it's killing people," he said. "In fact, the tsunami of cases is so huge and quick that it is overwhelming health systems around the world."

Ambulances for covid emergency wait at the Cervello hospital in Palermo, Sicily, where tented field hospitals have been set up in front of three hospitals to relieve the pressure on the emergency room and allow ambulances to get their patients into a bed rather than wait in line in the parking lot, Friday, Jan. 7, 2022. Sicily has seen its caseload double in recent days, from around 6,000 a day to 14,000 on Thursday, and has just under 1,000 people hospitalized with the virus. Credit: Alberto Lo Bianco/LaPresse via AP

That was evident Friday in London, where some 200 military personnel, including 40 medics, were being deployed to hospitals struggling to deliver vital care amid "exceptional" staff shortages blamed on the number of workers who are ill or isolating because of COVID-19. Next week, another 150 troops will help an ambulance service in northwest England.

On a visit to King's College Hospital London, Health Secretary Sajid Javid warned that hospital admissions were rising and that the NHS was facing a "rocky few weeks ahead."

A total of 39,142 NHS staff members at hospital trusts in England were absent for COVID-19 reasons on Jan. 2, up 59% from the previous week, according to figures released by the National Health Service in England.

The U.K. also has changed its coronavirus testing rules to reduce the amount of time people who test positive have to isolate.

An Emergency Department sign at St Thomas' Hospital is backdropped by the Elizabeth Tower of the Houses of Parliament, known as Big Ben, in London, Thursday, Jan. 6, 2022. Health authorities across the U.K. simplified COVID-19

Germany's leaders agreed Friday to toughen requirements for entry to restaurants and bars, and decided to shorten quarantine and self-isolation periods.

French authorities this week began allowing health care workers who are infected with the coronavirus but have few or no symptoms to keep treating patients rather than self-isolate.

France announced a staggering 332,252 daily virus cases on Wednesday, Europe's highest-ever single-day confirmed infection count.

The Netherlands has been in a strict lockdown for weeks, a move designed to ease pressure on overburdened hospitals and buy time for a slow-starting vaccination booster campaign to gather pace. Despite the lockdown, infections hit record numbers in the country this week.

In Palermo, Sicily, auxiliary facilities were set up in front of three hospitals to relieve the pressure on emergency rooms and to allow ambulance crews to get patients into beds instead of waiting in the parking lot.

A patient is pushed on a trolley outside the Royal London Hospital in the Whitechapel area of east London, Thursday, Jan. 6, 2022. Health authorities across the U.K. simplified COVID-19 testing requirements on Wednesday, a move designed to cut isolation times for many people and that may ease the staffing shortages that are hitting public services amid an omicron-fueled surge in coronavirus infections. A string of National Health Service local organizations have declared "critical incidents" in recent days amid staff shortages. Credit: AP Photo/Matt Dunham

Staff in white medical overalls and masks pushed gurneys from ambulances into the tents.

Tiziana Maniscalichi, director of Cervello and Civico Palermo hospitals, said most of those hospitalized with serious symptoms were not

vaccinated.

"We are absolutely under pressure," Maniscalichi told The Associated Press. "There are at least 70 new cases a day to be hospitalized. We were forced to set up an additional emergency unit in a tent, because the capacity of the ordinary emergency unit was not enough."

Italy is reporting record daily new coronavirus infections, hitting 219,000 new cases on Thursday. Authorities believe the peak in this surge is still two to three weeks away.

The hospital system already is swamped in the southern Italian city of Naples.

"We risk the collapse of the national healthcare service," said the head of the local hospital doctors' association, Bruno Zuccarelli.

6-year old kid Lotte puts on her jacket after she received her second coronavirus vaccination against the COVID-19 disease at the Laxness-Arena in Cologne, Germany, Friday, Jan. 7, 2022 where all participating children were rewarded for their vaccination. Credit: AP Photo/Martin Meissner

"We could be seeing a repeat of the scenes of October and November 2020 which were very, very dangerous," he added.

Greece's government on Friday issued a civil mobilization order that will take effect next Wednesday and obliges some doctors in the private sector to support the state health service during am omicron-driven surge in four northern regions where state hospitals are suffering acute staffing shortages.

In the U.K., which reported nearly 180,000 new cases on Thursday alone, omicron's advance has forced many workers to stay home and prompted the government to send in the troops.

Health service leaders said the military deployment highlighted how the country is battling to stay on top of the pandemic.

"We have never known this level of staff absence before," Chaand Nagpaul, council chairman of the British Medical Association, told Sky News.

Employee work on an assembly line at NG Biotech, a start-up that makes an array of medical tests, including kits for use at home and by medical professionals to detect COVID-19 infections , in Guipry, western France, Friday, Jan. 7, 2022. With France breaking records in Europe for coronavirus infections,

manufacturers are working flat-out to try to meet the huge demand for tests.
Credit: AP Photo/Jeremias Gonzalez

Paramedics push a trolley next to a line of ambulances outside the Royal London
Hospital in the Whitechapel area of east London, Thursday, Jan. 6, 2022. Health
authorities across the U.K. simplified COVID-19 testing requirements on
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fueled surge in coronavirus infections. A string of National Health Service local
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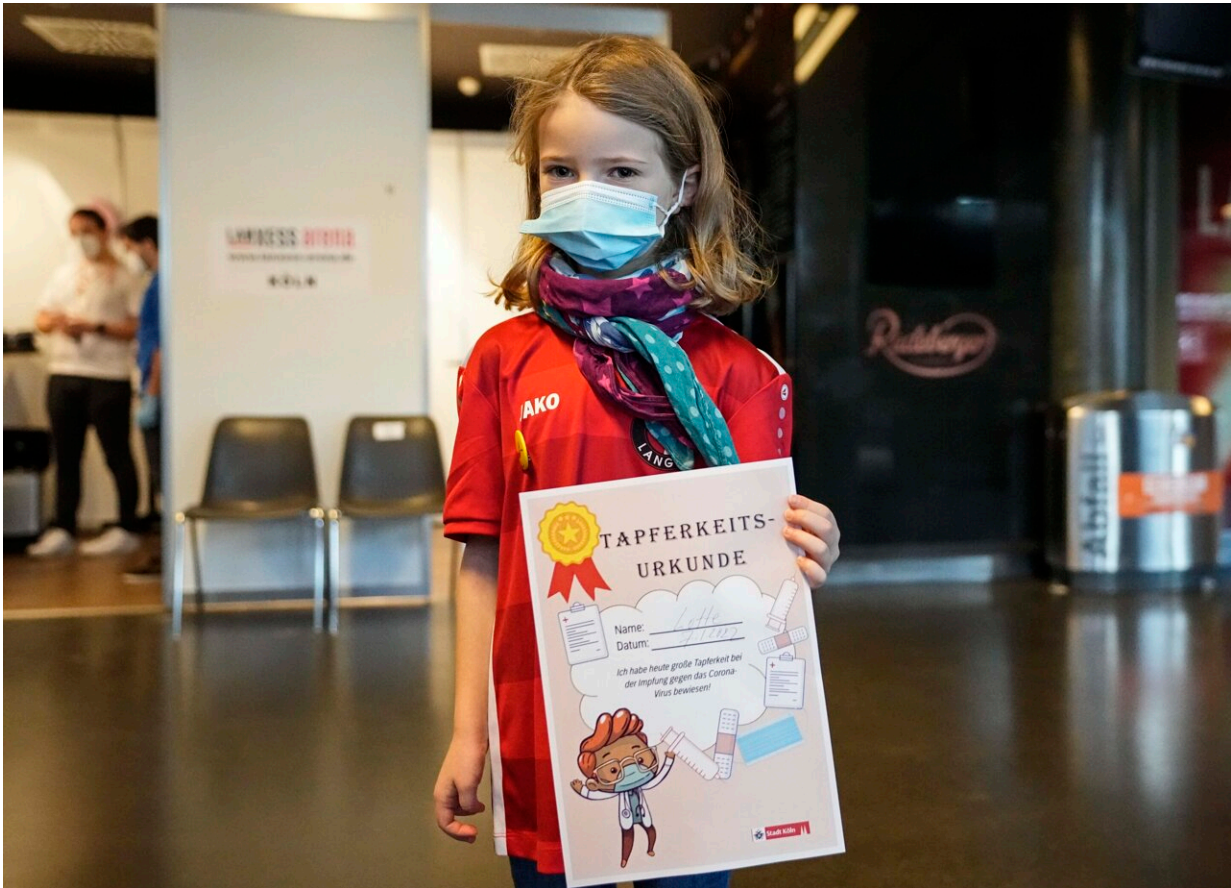shortages. Credit: AP Photo/Matt Dunham

A man wearing a face mask walks past a wooden board with graffiti reading "Want the pandemic to end?" in Rome, Friday, Jan. 7, 2022. Italy is struggling with nearly daily new records of fresh infections fueled by the omicron variant. Credit: AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia

Britain's Health Secretary Sajid Javid, right, meets staff in a COVID-19 Intensive Care Unit during a visit to Kings College Hospital in London, Friday Jan. 7, 2022. Credit: Stefan Rousseau/PA via AP

People with mandatory face masks line up to enter the Cathedral in Cologne, Germany, Friday, Jan. 7, 2022. New corona measures are expected from a meeting of German governors and the federal government today to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. Credit: AP Photo/Martin Meissner

6-year old kid Lotte shows her bravery certificate after she received her second coronavirus vaccination against the COVID-19 disease at the Laxness-Arena in Cologne, Germany, Friday, Jan. 7, 2022 where all participating children were rewarded for their vaccination. Credit: AP Photo/Martin Meissner

Air Commodore John Lyle told the BBC that the military remains in discussions about providing support for the NHS in other parts of the country.

Nagpaul urged action to bring down infections and better protect health care workers against the omicron variant, saying it was important that "the government doesn't just wait to ride this out, because every day

people are suffering."

In Naples, doctors' leader Zuccarelli said the mutations in the virus since Italy was hammered in the first wave in 2020 means children and even babies are now being hospitalized with COVID-19.

"The virus adapts to the environment, we have to make the habitat impossible for it, and to do that you absolutely have to vaccinate," he said. "Don't be afraid to vaccinate, you must be afraid of COVID."