

# Packed ICUs, crowded crematoriums: COVID roils Chinese towns

December 24 2022, by Dake Kang



A man pulls a cloth to cover up the face of an elderly woman whose vitals flatlined as emotional relatives gather silently around her for a final farewell before her body is taken away at the emergency department of the Langfang No. 4 People's Hospital in Bazhou city in northern China's Hebei province on Thursday, Dec. 22, 2022. As China grapples with its first-ever wave of COVID mass infections, emergency wards in the towns and cities to Beijing's southwest are overwhelmed. Intensive care units are turning away ambulances, residents are driving sick relatives from hospital to hospital, and patients are lying on floors

for a lack of space. Credit: AP Photo

Yao Ruyan paced frantically outside the fever clinic of a county hospital in China's industrial Hebei province, 70 kilometers (43 miles) southwest of Beijing. Her mother-in-law had COVID-19 and needed urgent medical care, but all hospitals nearby were full.

"They say there's no beds here," she barked into her phone.

As China grapples with its [first-ever national COVID-19 wave](#), emergency wards in small cities and towns southwest of Beijing are overwhelmed. Intensive care units are turning away ambulances, relatives of sick people are searching for open beds, and patients are slumped on benches in hospital corridors and lying on floors for a lack of beds.

Yao's elderly mother-in-law had fallen ill a week ago. They went first to a local hospital, where lung scans showed signs of pneumonia. But the hospital couldn't handle COVID-19 cases, Yao was told. She was told to go to hospitals in adjacent counties.

As Yao and her husband drove from hospital to hospital, they found all the wards were full. Zhuozhou Hospital, an hour's drive from Yao's hometown, was the latest disappointment.

"I'm furious," Yao said, tearing up, as she clutched the lung scans from the local hospital. "I don't have much hope. We've been out for a long time and I'm terrified because she's having difficulty breathing."



An ambulance prepares to transfer a patient in critical care to other hospitals due to overcapacity at the emergency department of the Langfang No. 4 People's Hospital in Bazhou city in northern China's Hebei province on Thursday, Dec. 22, 2022. As China grapples with its first-ever wave of COVID mass infections, emergency wards in the towns and cities to Beijing's southwest are overwhelmed. Intensive care units are turning away ambulances, residents are driving sick relatives from hospital to hospital, and patients are lying on floors for a lack of space. Credit: AP Photo

Over two days, Associated Press journalists visited five hospitals and two crematoriums in towns and small cities in Baoding and Langfang prefectures, in central Hebei province. The area was the epicenter of one of China's first outbreaks after the state loosened COVID-19 controls in November and December. For weeks, the region went quiet, as people



fell ill and stayed home.

Many have now recovered. Today, markets are bustling, diners pack restaurants and cars are honking in snarling traffic, even as the virus is spreading in other parts of China. In recent days, headlines in state media said the area is "[starting to resume normal life.](#)"

But life in central Hebei's emergency wards and crematoriums is anything but normal. Even as the young go back to work and lines at fever clinics shrink, many of Hebei's elderly are falling into critical condition. It could be a harbinger of what's to come for the rest of China.



A patient rests in a bed at the emergency department of the Langfang No. 4 People's Hospital in Bazhou city in northern China's Hebei province on

Thursday, Dec. 22, 2022. As China grapples with its first-ever wave of COVID mass infections, emergency wards in the towns and cities to Beijing's southwest are overwhelmed. Intensive care units are turning away ambulances, residents are driving sick relatives from hospital to hospital, and patients are lying on floors for a lack of space. Credit: AP Photo

The Chinese government has reported only seven COVID-19 deaths since restrictions were loosened dramatically on Dec. 7, bringing the country's total toll to 5,241. On Tuesday, a Chinese health official said that China only counts deaths from pneumonia or respiratory failure in its official COVID-19 death toll.

Experts have forecast between a million and 2 million deaths in China next year, and the World Health Organization warned that Beijing's way of counting would "underestimate the true death toll."

At Baoding No. 2 Hospital, in Zhuozhou, Wednesday, patients thronged the hallway of the emergency ward. The sick were breathing with the help of respirators. One woman wailed after doctors told her that a loved one had died.

At the Zhuozhou crematorium, furnaces are burning overtime as workers struggle to cope with a spike in deaths in the past week, according to one employee. A funeral shop worker estimated it is burning 20 to 30 bodies a day, up from three to four before COVID-19 measures were loosened.



Relatives attend to a sickened patient in a wheelchair at the emergency department of the Langfang No. 4 People's Hospital in Bazhou city in northern China's Hebei province on Thursday, Dec. 22, 2022. As China grapples with its first-ever wave of COVID mass infections, emergency wards in the towns and cities to Beijing's southwest are overwhelmed. Intensive care units are turning away ambulances, residents are driving sick relatives from hospital to hospital, and patients are lying on floors for a lack of space. Credit: AP Photo/Dake Kang

"There's been so many people dying," said Zhao Yongsheng, a worker at a funeral goods shop near a local hospital. "They work day and night, but they can't burn them all."

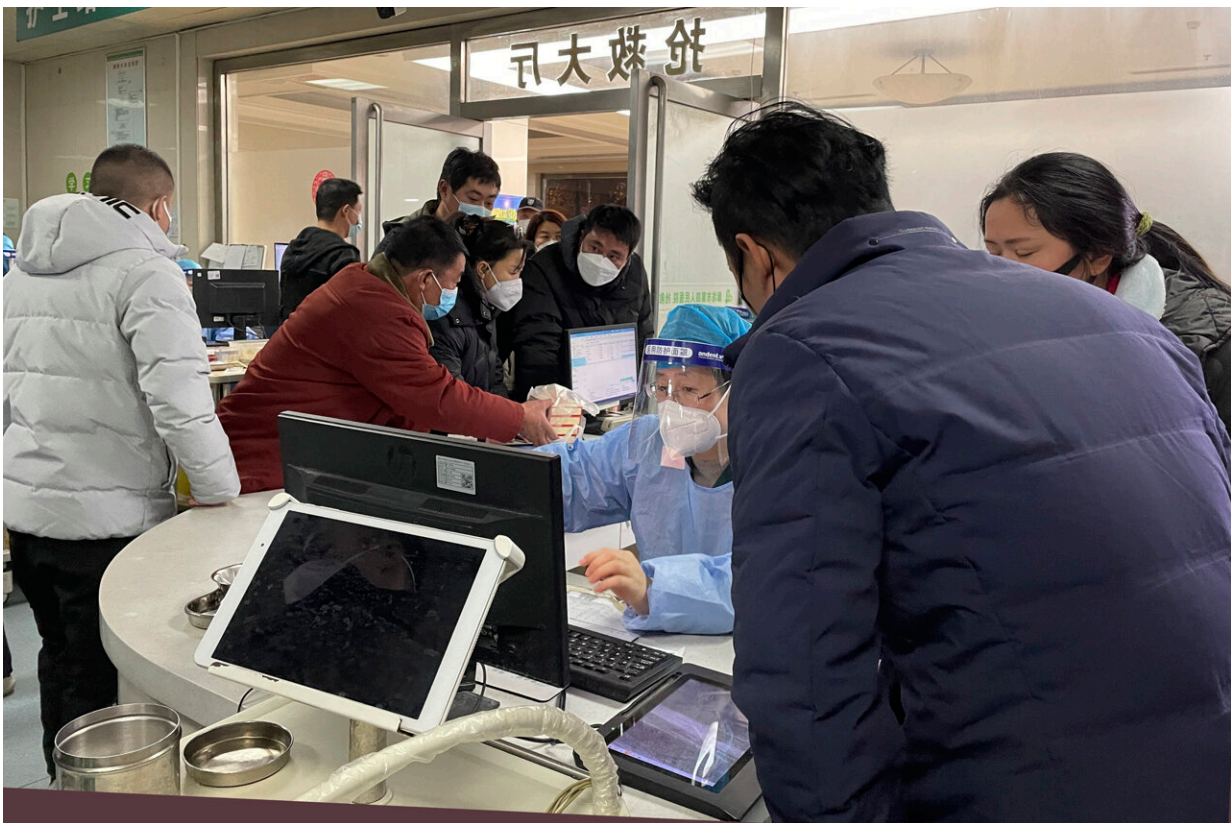
Over two hours at the Gaobeidian crematorium on Thursday, AP journalists observed three ambulances and two vans unload bodies.



"There's been a lot!" a worker said when asked about the number of COVID-19 deaths, before funeral director Ma Xiaowei stepped in and brought the journalists to meet a local government official.

As the official listened in, Ma confirmed there were more cremations, but said he didn't know if COVID-19 was involved. He blamed the extra deaths on the arrival of winter.

But even as anecdotal evidence and modeling suggests large numbers of people are getting infected and dying, some Hebei officials deny the virus has had much impact.



A worker in protective gear attends to visitors at the emergency department of the Langfang No. 4 People's Hospital in Bazhou city in northern China's Hebei province on Thursday, Dec. 22, 2022. As China grapples with its first-ever wave

of COVID mass infections, emergency wards in the towns and cities to Beijing's southwest are overwhelmed. Intensive care units are turning away ambulances, residents are driving sick relatives from hospital to hospital, and patients are lying on floors for a lack of space. Credit: AP Photo

"There's no so-called explosion in cases, it's all under control," said Wang Ping, the administrative manager of Gaobeidian Hospital, speaking by the hospital's main gate.

Wang said only a sixth of the hospital's 600 beds were occupied, but refused to allow AP journalists to enter. Two ambulances came to the hospital during the half hour AP journalists were present, and a patient's relative told the AP they were turned away from Gaobeidian's emergency ward because it was full.

In Bazhou, a city 100 kilometers (60 miles) east of Gaobeidian, a hundred or more people packed the emergency ward of Langfang No. 4 People's Hospital on Thursday night.

Guards worked to corral the crowds as people jostled for positions. With no space in the ward, patients spilled into corridors and hallways. Sick people sprawled on blankets on the floor as staff frantically wheeled gurneys and ventilators. In a hallway, half a dozen patients wheezed on metal benches as oxygen tanks pumped air into their noses.





A sickened patient is moved onto a gurney at the emergency department of the Langfang No. 4 People's Hospital in Bazhou city in northern China's Hebei province on Thursday, Dec. 22, 2022. As China grapples with its first-ever wave of COVID mass infections, emergency wards in the towns and cities to Beijing's southwest are overwhelmed. Intensive care units are turning away ambulances, residents are driving sick relatives from hospital to hospital, and patients are lying on floors for a lack of space. Credit: AP Photo



A hospital worker prepares to perform tests after placing electrodes to the chest of a man sprawled out on a stretcher outside the emergency ward at the Langfang No. 4 People's Hospital in Bazhou city in northern China's Hebei province on Thursday, Dec. 22, 2022. As China grapples with its first-ever wave of COVID mass infections, emergency wards in the towns and cities to Beijing's southwest are overwhelmed. Intensive care units are turning away ambulances, residents are driving sick relatives from hospital to hospital, and patients are lying on floors for a lack of space. Credit: AP Photo





Relatives gather near the beds of sickened patients at the emergency department of the Langfang No. 4 People's Hospital in Bazhou city in northern China's Hebei province on Thursday, Dec. 22, 2022. As China grapples with its first-ever wave of COVID mass infections, emergency wards in the towns and cities to Beijing's southwest are overwhelmed. Intensive care units are turning away ambulances, residents are driving sick relatives from hospital to hospital, and patients are lying on floors for a lack of space. Credit: AP Photo/Dake Kang





A patient rests in a wheelchair at the emergency department of the Langfang No. 4 People's Hospital in Bazhou city in northern China's Hebei province on Thursday, Dec. 22, 2022. As China grapples with its first-ever wave of COVID mass infections, emergency wards in the towns and cities to Beijing's southwest are overwhelmed. Intensive care units are turning away ambulances, residents are driving sick relatives from hospital to hospital, and patients are lying on floors for a lack of space. Credit: AP Photo/Dake Kang



Hospital workers discuss their work at the emergency department of Baigou New Area Aerospace Hospital in Baigou, in northern China's Hebei province on Thursday, Dec. 22, 2022. As China grapples with its first-ever wave of COVID mass infections, emergency wards in the towns and cities to Beijing's southwest are overwhelmed. Intensive care units are turning away ambulances, residents are driving sick relatives from hospital to hospital, and patients are lying on floors for a lack of space. Credit: AP Photo





A hospital worker in protective gear disinfects the ward of an emergency department of Baigou New Area Aerospace Hospital in Baigou in northern China's Hebei province on Thursday, Dec. 22, 2022. As China grapples with its first-ever wave of COVID mass infections, emergency wards in the towns and cities to Beijing's southwest are overwhelmed. Intensive care units are turning away ambulances, residents are driving sick relatives from hospital to hospital, and patients are lying on floors for a lack of space. Credit: AP Photo





Visitors to the Baigou New Area Aerospace Hospital stand near the words "Emergency Clinic" in Baigou, in northern China's Hebei province on Thursday, Dec. 22, 2022. As China grapples with its first-ever wave of COVID mass infections, emergency wards in the towns and cities to Beijing's southwest are overwhelmed. Intensive care units are turning away ambulances, residents are driving sick relatives from hospital to hospital, and patients are lying on floors for a lack of space. Credit: AP Photo



A hospital worker stands behind a counter at the Baigou New Area Aerospace Hospital in Baigou, northern China's Hebei province on Thursday, Dec. 22, 2022. As China grapples with its first-ever wave of COVID mass infections, emergency wards in the towns and cities to Beijing's southwest are overwhelmed. Intensive care units are turning away ambulances, residents are driving sick relatives from hospital to hospital, and patients are lying on floors for a lack of space. Credit: AP Photo





Liang from Beijing, center looks on as his 82-year-old grandmother is brought in a casket to the Gaobeidian Funeral Home in northern China's Hebei province, Thursday, Dec. 22, 2022. Liang's grandmother had been unvaccinated when she came down with coronavirus symptoms, and had spent her final days hooked to a respirator in a Beijing ICU. Credit: AP Photo





Family members light fireworks as offerings for their deceased relative at the Gaobeidian Funeral Home in northern China's Hebei province, Thursday, Dec. 22, 2022. Bodies from Beijing, a two-hour drive away, are appearing at the Gaobeidian funeral home, because similar funeral homes in Beijing were packed. Credit: AP Photo



Relatives carry paper offerings to burn for their dead relative at the Gaobeidian Funeral Home in northern China's Hebei province, Thursday, Dec. 22, 2022. Bodies from Beijing, a two-hour drive away, are appearing at the Gaobeidian funeral home, because similar funeral homes in Beijing were packed. Credit: AP Photo



A relative in traditional Chinese funeral attire stands near funeral wreaths at the Gaobeidian Funeral Home in northern China's Hebei province, Thursday, Dec. 22, 2022. Bodies from Beijing, a two-hour drive away are appearing at the Gaobeidian funeral home, because similar funeral homes in Beijing were packed. Credit: AP Photo





A man lifts an empty casket onto a van as relatives in traditional Chinese funeral attire rest near the Gaobeidian Funeral Home in northern China's Hebei province, Thursday, Dec. 22, 2022. Bodies from Beijing, a two-hour drive away are appearing at the Gaobeidian funeral home, because similar funeral homes in Beijing were packed. Credit: AP Photo

Over two hours, AP journalists witnessed half a dozen or more ambulances pull up to the hospital's ICU and load critical patients to sprint to other hospitals, even as cars pulled up with dozens of new patients.

A beige van pulled up to the ICU and honked frantically at a waiting ambulance. "Move!" the driver shouted.

"Let's go, let's go!" a panicked voice cried. Five people hoisted a man bundled in blankets out of the back of the van and rushed him into the hospital.

The guard asked a patient to move, but backed off when a relative snarled at him. The bundled man was laid on the floor instead, amid doctors running back and forth.

Medical workers rushed over a ventilator. "Can you open his mouth?" someone shouted.

As white plastic tubes were fitted onto his face, the man began to breathe more easily.

Others were not so lucky. Relatives surrounding another bed began tearing up as an elderly woman's vitals flatlined. A man tugged a cloth over the woman's face, and they stood, silently, before her body was wheeled away. Within minutes, another patient had taken her place.

© 2022 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without permission.

Citation: Packed ICUs, crowded crematoriums: COVID roils Chinese towns (2022, December 24) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-12-icus-crowded-crematoriums-covid-roils.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.