

CORONAVIRUS | GERMANY

# Coronavirus in Germany: ‘immunity passports’ for people free from infection

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Medical volunteers have been carrying out virus testing in Germany

SEAN GALLUP/GETTY

When a 33-year-old Bavarian came down with a sore throat, cough and 39C fever at the end of January, he thought little of it: his symptoms soon passed and he returned to work at Webasto, a car-parts-maker in the town of Stockdorf.

Then an email from China arrived: a woman from Webasto's Shanghai subsidiary who had visited a week earlier had tested positive for the coronavirus raging in China. She had apparently picked it up from her parents, who are from Wuhan, where the outbreak began.

The Bavarian, who has not been named, immediately went to his doctor and was also found to be positive in what is believed to be the first instance of the virus being transmitted on European soil.

The response was swift: even before the man's test result came back, Webasto had been shut down, its 1,500 employees told to work from home and more than 100 people thought to have come into contact with the man were tested.

The plant stayed closed for two weeks, while the man himself — together with another 15 also found to have been infected — were sent for treatment at a clinic in Munich, nine miles away.

“It was all surreal,” the man told Bavarian radio. “I could not understand how I could be the first person in Germany to have this virus even though I felt completely well.”

Despite developing no further symptoms, he was held in the clinic for 18 days. “It was very boring and the psychological pressure was great,” he added. The first thing he did when he got home to his wife and children was to order a pizza.

The same approach was taken almost a month later in Heinsberg, more than 300 miles away in North Rhine-Westphalia, when another man tested positive after being admitted to hospital.

A team of 50 local officials — with experts from Germany’s health ministry and the Robert Koch Institute, the national centre for disease control — set out to retrace his movements. After they found he had attended a carnival five miles away in Langbroich Gangelt, hundreds who had also been there were asked to self-quarantine for a fortnight.

The rigour with which such early cases were investigated goes a long way towards explaining one of the anomalies of the Covid-19 pandemic: why Germany, although one of the first countries to have been hit by the coronavirus, has suffered proportionately far fewer serious illnesses and deaths than its neighbours.

By yesterday, the reported death toll in Germany was 395. Although rising fast, it was still far short of the 1,019 in Britain, 1,995 in France, 5,690 in Spain and 9,134 in Italy. It also had fewer cases of serious illness.

“The strategy is you track down every positive case and try to get results from the people with whom this person was in contact,” said Reinhard Busse, head of the department of healthcare management at the Berlin University of Technology. “The earlier you start with that the better you are able to track the spread of the disease.”

The approach — similar to that successfully followed in South Korea — explains why the chancellor, Angela Merkel, was quarantined last week after a doctor who had vaccinated her tested positive for the virus. Busse said: “We are waiting to see if her test result turns positive. That’s still the general strategy, even though it becomes harder the more cases you have. It’s not just for the chancellor but for everyone.”

Such tests — Germany is now carrying out about 500,000 a week — are conducted not only at GPs’ surgeries or hospitals: drive-through testing has been offered in special tents. One has been erected at Munich’s Theresienwiese, site of the annual

Oktoberfest beer festival, where queues of cars formed last week. People can also test themselves at home and drop off the kits at laboratories.

The German government plans to chart the spread of the disease by testing how many people have acquired antibodies. Researchers hope to have done 100,000 tests by the end of next month, which would be repeated regularly to help decide when to reopen schools and lift other restrictions.

Those shown to have developed immunity could be given a “kind of vaccination passport that allows them, for example, to be exempted from curbs on their activities”, Gérard Krause, a leading immunologist co-ordinating the study, told Der Spiegel magazine.

The most obvious benefit of testing, coupled with tracing and quarantining, is that it prevents clusters forming around superspreaders. It also gives epidemiologists a more accurate picture of the spread of the virus and how deadly it is.

This largely explains a second apparent German anomaly — why only 0.7% of those who tested positive have since died, a tiny fraction of the 7.9% in Spain and 10.6% in Italy. Casting the net more widely means a more representative sample of the population, including those with the virus but no symptoms. That is not the case in many other European countries, including Britain, where only those who are already sick are checked.

The situation in Germany, as elsewhere, will become considerably worse before it gets better. Until social distancing measures were introduced last weekend, the parks of Berlin and other cities were packed, as were bars, restaurants and clubs. For the near future, at least, the number of new infections is likely to rise exponentially.

“This is still the calm before the storm,” Jens Spahn, the health minister, warned. “No one can say what will come in the next weeks.”

A study by the German interior ministry, dated last Sunday and leaked to German media, suggested that in a worst-case scenario with 70% of Germany's 83 million people infected, 80% of potential intensive care patients would be turned away by hospitals and more than a million would die.

Infections could be cut to a million and deaths to 12,000, the study said, if tests were stepped up to 200,000 a day, if location tracking of cases were introduced and restrictions on movement were maintained for two months.

Even when the expected storm hits Germany, its defences will be better than in some other countries. Before the crisis hit, it had about 30 intensive care beds per 100,000 people — the most in Europe and over four times the number in Britain. It is also well equipped with ventilators.

This is not only because Germany spends more on health. It is also due to its insurance-based medical system, which provides incentives for hospitals to boost intensive care facilities. “The way we pay hospitals, ventilation is well paid, so if you are a hospital manager you buy a ventilator,” Busse said.

In a further stroke of good fortune, the cases are also relatively evenly spread across the country, despite a continuing peak in Heinsberg, near the site of the carnival. Levels are lower in the former communist east, perhaps because it is more sparsely populated. Authorities in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, on the northeast coast, have tried to keep it that way by largely sealing off their state from the rest of Germany.

The result, for now, is spare capacity, in contrast to Italy and Spain where doctors are increasingly forced to choose who gets lifesaving care, and to France where authorities responded to hospital overcrowding in its Grand Est region by transporting 20 intensive care patients hundreds of miles to hospitals in western France on a converted high-speed train.

German hospitals have also taken in at least 30 patients from Grand Est, as well as the first of a promised 47 from Italy.

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