

'See the doctor': fever-hit patients fret in China outbreak city

24 January 2020

Trapped in a Chinese city at the centre of a deadly viral outbreak, residents who should have been celebrating Lunar New Year lined up to have their temperatures taken by medical staff wearing full-body protective suits.

At hospitals across Wuhan in central Hubei province, tense patients with high temperatures turned out in large numbers to get checked as the death toll rose to 26 and the number of cases topped 800, most of them in the [city](#).

The streets were otherwise empty and quiet on Friday, with people ordered not to leave the city and public events cancelled.

"I have a fever and cough, so I'm worried that I'm infected," a 35-year-old man surnamed Li said at the Wuhan Fifth Hospital.

"I don't know the results (of tests) yet. I'm a bit worried."

Most of the people at the hospital were middle-aged or older, and were being given [mercury thermometers](#) on arrival.

After taking their temperatures themselves from their mouth or armpit, jittery patients handed the instruments back to [medical staff](#) decked in full white protective suits with a hood, gloves, [face mask](#) and goggles.

The thermometers were briefly checked, then dropped in a large metal box.

One nurse took a thermometer from a middle-aged woman, pausing to examine the reading, before quickly turning back to the patient and instructing her to "go and see the doctor".

Contagion fears

At another hospital, 42-year-old Huang Wei said he

was worried the situation would worsen if [sick people](#) stood next to each other and that the city of 11 million people would not have the medical capacity to cope with a bigger outbreak.

"The [medical treatment](#) is not sufficient, the time is too long, and cross-infection may be caused by queueing in the hospital," he said.

"This is what we are worried about."

Patients waited for several hours for temperature checks at the Red Cross hospital, with many sitting on stools because the queue was so long.

All [staff](#) at both hospitals were in full-body protection, but some of the patients waiting to be checked were not even wearing masks—in defiance of an order by city authorities.

At a nearby pharmacy, nervous staff wouldn't allow people inside.

Instead, they half-opened the door and passed out what customers were ordering—mostly face masks.

But not all their customers were as cautious.

One older lady told AFP she had bought a mask, but didn't wear it because she only shopped at the local market and didn't believe there was a threat there.

'Get out'

A notice outside the Wuhan Fifth Hospital said the facility was to be "entirely used for handling fever patients".

"Our hospital will no longer take in patients with other diseases," it read.

But despite the high number of infected people, security was low and the hospital was disorderly.

A nurse at a temperature station was the only member of staff at the entrance, meaning people could enter and leave from the street freely.

The police were noticeably absent across the city, though a few well-covered officers waited in a van near the hospital, wearing plastic suits and face masks.

The Wuhan Health Commission told the People's Daily that the city was seeing long queues at fever treatment centres, with seven hospitals "fully utilised".

The city is also building a new hospital within a staggering 10 days to deal with the outbreak.

Dozens of excavators and trucks were working on the site of the future [hospital](#).

The facility will have a capacity of 1,000 beds, and the construction area is 25,000 square metres (270,000 square feet), state media said.

For now, the doctors and staff at the Fifth Hospital know their priorities.

"Those who are not ill, get out!" a guard called at the entrance to its outpatient department.

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