

Italy's doctors look for help from sleek new robots

4 April 2020, by Miguel Medina



One of the six robots at the Circolo di Varese hospital in northern Italy checks up on a patient in the intensive care unit, helping medical staff reduce the risk of direct contact

The shiny new robots gently check the pulses of highly infectious patients on life support in the Italian epicentre of COVID-19.

The doctors and nurses love them because they also help save their own lives.

Italians have seen the world around them turn unrecognisable from the various lockdowns and social distancing measures used to fight the new coronavirus outbreak.

But little appears to have pained them as much as seeing dozens of doctors and nurses die while trying to save the tens of thousands of patients who have suddenly ended up in hospitals across Italy's pandemic-hit north.

The country's medical association said Friday that at least 70 medics have died from various causes since Italy recorded the first official COVID-19 death on February 21.

The fear is that an overwhelmingly majority of the 70 would still be alive today had they been better protected against the coronavirus.

This helps explain why the doctors and nurses in a hospital near Italy's mountainous border with Switzerland are laughing behind their facemasks while posing for photos with their new [robot](#) friends.

The Varese hospital has received six of the sleek and slightly human looking machines on wheels.



A nurse (left) operates a robot used to check up on seriously ill coronavirus patients in Varese, northern Italy.

Some are white and have screens and various sensors in place of a human head.

Others are simpler and look a little like a black broomstick on wheels.

The doctors say the robots bring smiles from the younger patients.

But their real purpose is to help save doctors from both catching and spreading the disease.

"Robots are tireless assistants that can't get infected, that can't get sick," said the Circolo Hospital's [intensive care unit](#) director Francesco Dentali.

"Doctors and nurses have been hit hard by this virus. The fact that the robots can't get infected is a great achievement."

The readings from the machines allows medics to stay out of the intensive care units and monitor patients' [vital signs](#) on computer screens in separate rooms.

Italy's [death toll](#), the worst globally, has reached 14,681 and is on course to top 15,000 this weekend.



Medical staff in Varese, northern Italy, with Ivo the robot who helps them treat seriously ill coronavirus patients and reduce the risk of them getting infected

Doctors doubt the official figures and think the real number of dead may be twice as high in Varese's Lombardy region.

Italy is expected to remain under a general lockdown at least through the end month.

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