

Situation report – Covid-19; Japan, Tuesday 14th of April 2020

Covid-19 Reported Caseload in Japan and Tokyo

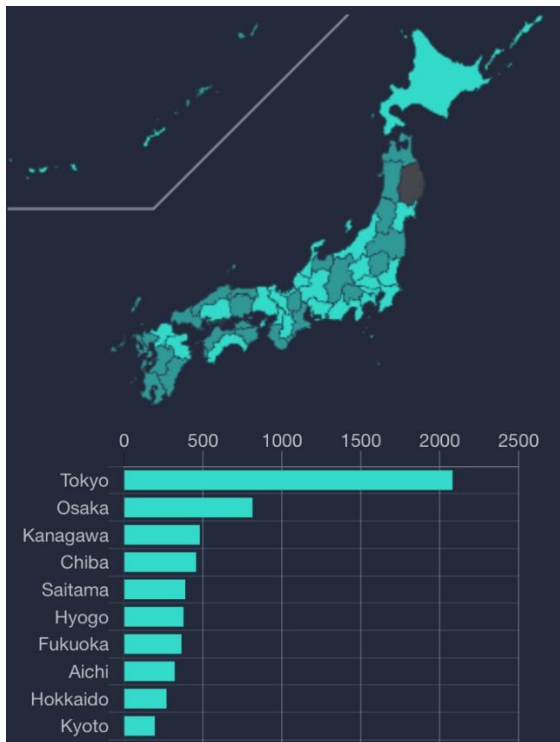


Total Covid-19 diagnoses have increased with an accelerating trend over the past two weeks. During the month of March, 1,663 cases were diagnosed across the country, with more than three times as many new diagnoses (5,236 cases) reported in the first two weeks of April. Total numbers of deaths due to Covid-19 continue to remain low by comparison with other countries, though, a statistic which is quoted by the government to justify a relatively slow expansion in testing and a more laissez-faire approach to social distancing measures.



As of now there is no evidence that the gradual increase in advice to citizens to voluntarily implement social distancing measures is being effective in reducing the rate of new infections.

A senior public health policy figure working for an international organisation contacted for comment observed that based on data from other countries, Japan now appears to be entering an exponential phase in infections and that as such there is a significant risk that within a few weeks the daily death toll will be in the hundreds and the capacity to provide intensive care support under significant strain.



As has been the case for several weeks, case numbers in Tokyo remain higher than in other parts of Japan with a recent peak of 197 new infections diagnosed on the 11th of April.

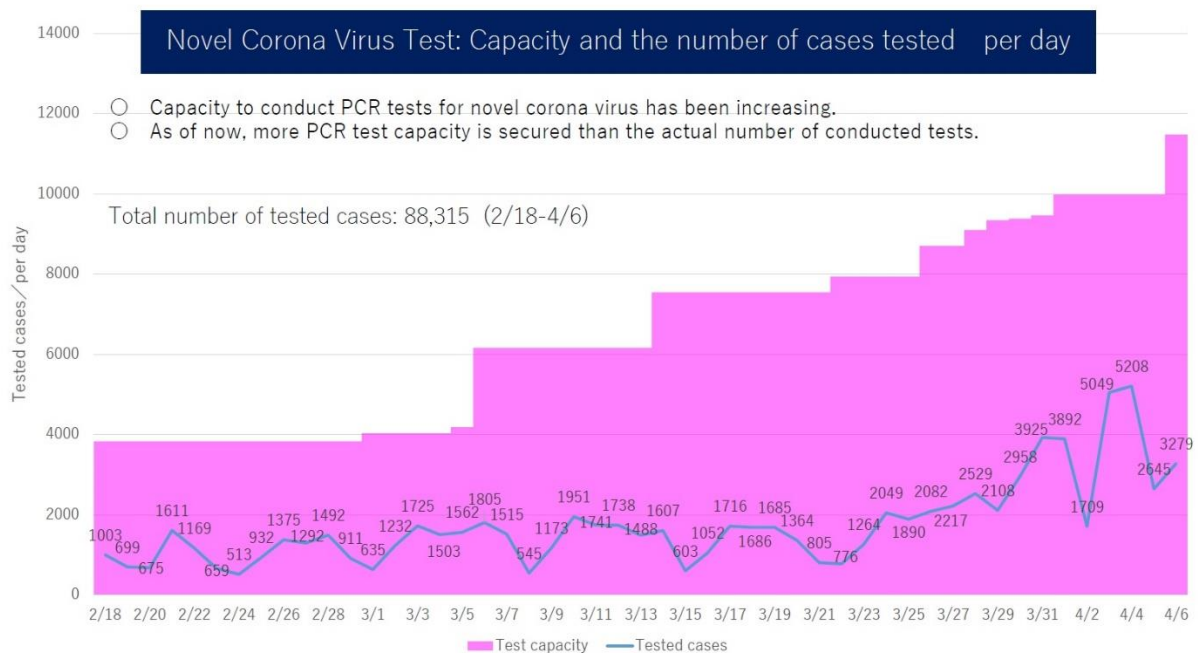
Residents who have been following international news will have observed that social distancing measures are considerably less strict in Japan than in other countries and are in most instances voluntary. As a consequence, use of the Tokyo subway network during commuting hours remained at close to normal levels until as recently as the first week of April at which time usage was 10-30% below seasonal average. Within the last week, a significant reduction in the number of commuters on the subway has finally been observed, though the network remains in operation and carries approximately half of its normal volume of rush hour passengers.



The continued increase in case numbers has prompted additional calls from the government for citizens to increase social isolation with a stated goal of a 70% reduction in commuters. The next several weeks are likely to determine whether these comparatively light-handed calls for voluntary reductions in social contact are adequate or not.

Testing for Covid-19 in Japan

Capacity to perform PCR tests for Covid-19 has increased and the total number of tests performed has likewise risen but has consistently remained well below capacity. At present the government's stated goal is to reach a daily testing capacity of 20,000 tests per day; on a per capita basis this would still be considerably lower than the in-place capacity in most European countries, North America, China and other developed countries in Asia.



In response to criticism from the Japan Medical Association (JMA), authorities in Japan have stated that when doctors request that their patients are tested for Covid-19, such requests will not be declined. In practice, a relatively strict triage policy remains in place and tests can still only be performed after authorization by local health units. Patients will be considered for testing after four days of symptoms (cough and fever) and usually then only after an initial assessment including a chest x-ray has been performed. In practice, health units appear to discourage testing requests in patients who have not developed radiological evidence of pneumonia, although data from the Covid-19 outbreak in Wuhan suggested that only 20% of Covid-19 patients there developed pneumonia. However, as of this week the health unit that our office works with has agreed to test patients with strongly suggestive symptoms even without the presence of pneumonia.

Patients for whom Covid-19 testing has been agreed may still have to wait several days before a test is actually performed and we are advised that results from testing will be released after 3-4 days, for an overall turnaround time of up to a week. In view of the limitations which this places on our ability to care for patients, we continue to press for permission to test in our clinic though so far without success. We are additionally exploring the option of buying Covid-19 antibody tests from overseas but would have to use them without local regulatory approval.

Hospital Care in Tokyo

Following the recent decision to allow Covid-19 patients with mild symptoms to isolate at home or stay in a dedicated hotel, some of the pressure on lower dependency hospital beds has been relieved though shortages in beds are reported in some parts of Japan. Tokyo hospitals have a stated current capacity for 2,000 Covid-19 patients, and are running at close to this capacity.

Although there are presently enough high dependency (intensive care/ventilator) beds to care for the numbers of patients requiring treatment in Japan, concerns are increasingly being expressed in the medical community over the potential for this capacity to be exceeded should there be an abrupt increase in cases. Osamu Nishida, president of the Japanese Society of Intensive Care medicine, observed that a higher availability of intensive care beds in Germany may have been a decisive factor in the significantly lower Covid-19 mortality as compared to Italy. Germany is quoted as having 30 ICU beds per 100,000 population vs. 12 per 100,000 in Italy; mortality as 1.1% in Germany vs over 11% in Italy with the implication that a number of patients died in Italy due to the lack of availability of intensive support. For comparison, Japan has far fewer ICU beds even than Italy (5 per 100,000 people) and concerns are raised by intensivists that expanding this capacity would be difficult not simply due to a lack of medical equipment but more because there is a lack of trained staff. There are calls in the medical community to clarify the ethics of rationing intensive support.

References

Reported Caseload Graphs and data sourced from MHLW as reported by Toyo Keizai - <https://toyokeizai.net/sp/visual/tko/covid19/en.html>

Test Capacity Graph – Covid-19 situation in Japan (statistical data) as reported by the office of the prime minister of Japan and his cabinet – http://japan.kantei.go.jp/ongoingtopics/_00017.html

President's statement on New Coronavirus Infection (COVID-19) – The Japanese Society of Intensive Care Medicine. <https://www.jsicm.org/news/statement200401.html>