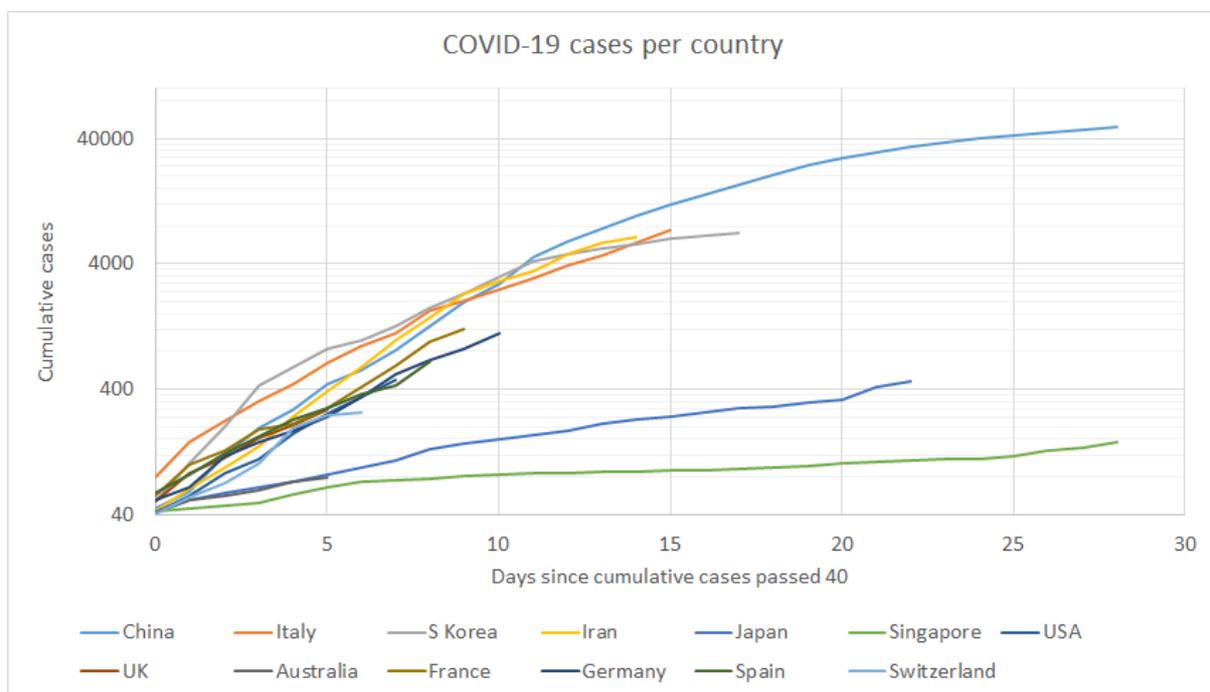


Situation report – Covid-19; Japan, Tuesday 24th of March 2020

Covid-19 Reported Caseload in Japan

As has been reported in the media both locally and internationally, Covid-19 has spread less rapidly in Japan than in most other countries, perhaps excepting Taiwan and Singapore. Although there has been speculation that Japan's lower number of reported cases was due to failure to test extensively, the fact that the total number of deaths from Covid-19 has been low in Japan would seem to suggest that spread here genuinely is less rapid than in most other countries. Reported total Covid-19 deaths to date in Japan are 41, which is significantly below the totals in seven European countries (Italy; Spain; France; Germany; Switzerland; UK; Netherlands)¹.



It is difficult to draw a definite conclusion as to why this has been observed. There has been some speculation that intrinsic social distance between people in Japan is greater than in many other countries, with no social conventions to hug or shake hands when greeting; it has been observed that Japanese people wash their hands more regularly and with less prompting. However, within the local medical community there are concerns that infection rates will rise and that it may become necessary to impose tighter social controls in the future (for example, closing restaurants and other businesses, as has happened in many other countries).

Testing for Covid-19 in Japan

Japan continues to perform relatively few tests for Covid-19 (14,901 total tests performed by the 19th of March as compared to over 300,000 performed in South Korea)². As has been the case since the outbreak began, testing has been tightly centrally controlled and can only be performed as determined by local health units (hokenjo). In practice, this means that individuals with acute respiratory symptoms severe enough to require in-patient treatment will be tested and that known direct contacts of patients with Covid-19 who develop symptoms are likely to be tested. Otherwise, individuals with mild to moderate respiratory symptoms are more likely to be designated as probable or suspected cases and to isolate themselves and await resolution.

As of last week, travellers into Japan from most countries are being asked to self-isolate for 14 days as a precaution. These individuals are more likely to be offered Covid-19 testing should they develop symptoms, but are being cautioned that should they test positive, they will face a compulsory 14 day hospitalization (regardless of severity of illness). Patients are reporting that this is being used to dissuade them from attending for a test if their symptoms are not severe enough to warrant infection.

Currently, the Japanese government has only approved PCR (polymerase chain reaction) testing performed on a nasal swab. This test is considered to be the gold standard for accurate detection of Covid-19 as it detects viral DNA; however, it takes several hours to run and in practical terms results will usually be available a day later. Other countries (including Korea) have used rapid point of care test kits which give a result in under 30 minutes. These tests, however, check for antibodies, which are only made several days into an infection. As such, they will return false negative results on people tested in the first few days after an infection, and they may also have a small false positive rate – as is known to happen when this technology is used for rapid HIV tests, for example. Should these point of care antibody test kits be approved, as may well happen during the course of the year, testing options may increase substantially.

Hospital Care in Tokyo

Doctors working in larger central Tokyo hospitals informally asked for comment are currently not reporting any lack of:

- Hospital beds
- Capacity for higher dependency patients (intensive care/ventilation)

References

- 1) WHO situation report 63, 23 March 2020. https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronavirus/situation-reports/20200323-sitrep-63-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=d97cb6dd_2
- 2) Our World in Data Covid testing, 20 March 2020. <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-testing>