

# The Correct Covid-19 Lesson from Italy

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## Abstract

Other countries attempted to learn the lesson of Italy as Covid-19 spread. All too often they learnt the wrong lesson: *don't overwhelm your hospital system – flatten the curve*. I argue that this is the wrong starting point. The optimal solution is to get to where South Korea and Iceland were before the number infected is too high to contain; second-best is a lockdown to bring infections under control, followed by the optimal solution.

*Keywords:* Covid-19, epidemiology, flattening the curve

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I write from South Africa where our lockdown has significant success in “flattening the curve” and it is an opportune time to reflect on what to do next.

Other countries attempted to learn the lesson of Italy as Covid-19 spread. All too often they learnt the wrong lesson: *don't overwhelm your hospital system – flatten the curve*. While Italy had a poor outcome (life expectancy in the most severe areas is reduced by Covid-19 to the lowest since World War II [1]), it is not the place to look. The correct type of example is localities where the outbreak was contained with minimal casualties and economic disruption.

Consider South Korea and Iceland. In South Korea, testing and contact tracing were rapidly rolled out, enabling isolation of positive cases and rapid damping down of the infection despite the fact that the country was not prepared in time. South Korea was consequently able to avoid a mandatory lockdown [2]. In Iceland, a similar strategy had an even better outcome as the country was able to put it in place before the first infection [3].

The optimal solution is to get to where South Korea and Iceland were before the number infected is too high to contain; second-best is a lockdown to bring infections under control, followed by the optimal solution.

Instead, the UK and New York, to name two examples, focused on reducing hospital admissions, leading to the critical mistake of discharging patients

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to care homes [4], resulting in a rapid spread of the disease among the elderly and a high rate of fatalities [5].

The “flattening the curve” narrative is depressing: it implies that total Covid-19 deaths will not reduce significantly though the final toll will be reached without overwhelming health systems. That aim seems far too pessimistic if South Korea has been able to contain the pandemic after initially being a hotspot.

I appeal to all countries that still have the option to damp infections down as effectively as South Korea and Iceland did to keep that option open. Here in South Africa, switching from lockdown to rigorous contact tracing, testing and isolating is still possible and should be the preferred strategy, not merely “flattening the curve”.

Laudable though the goal of protecting a health system is, that cannot be an end in itself. Protecting the public should remain the primary purpose of any health system.

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