



# May you live in interesting times: COVID-19 and Mater Dei Hospital, Malta

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“May you live in interesting times” is purported to be an ancient Chinese curse, and these are “interesting” times indeed. At the time of writing, COVID-19 is a pandemic and it is spreading slowly in Malta.[1] This is one of the smallest countries in the world with only one large National Health Service hospital that offers intensive care facilities (Mater Dei Hospital).

The Maltese populace, having watched the unfolding nightmare in neighbouring countries - and even those located far

away - realise that if it happened to them, it could happen to us.[2] Determined to avoid these scenarios if at all possible, the Maltese Government, in conjunction with the Health Division and Public Health, instituted partial lockdown measures aimed at slowing down COVID-19 spread in the country.

The medical profession, too, geared up and this photoessay is about how Mater Dei Hospital took charge of the situation through a well thought out repurposing and expansion exercise.



Figure 1: The University of Malta Medical School is part of Mater Dei Hospital. The Medical School Library has been emptied, gutted, and filled with 50 beds.

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This author managed to take a behind the scenes tour of hospital modifications with Mr. Joseph Gherxi, a Technical Officer within the hospital Engineering Directorate, in order to witness the changes made to the hospital in the last two months by a

twenty man team. The tour was sanctioned by the hospital Chief Executive Officer. Photographs were taken with and edited on a mobile phone in a technique refined and defined in two fund-raising publications by this author.[3,4]



Figure 2: The staff canteen has also been emptied (note abandoned food dispensing station and plastic covered coffee machine) and transformed into a ward.



Figure 3: A strong room for potentially violent/criminal COVID-19 cases is also under construction. This used to be the hospital underground exit to the car park.



Figure 4a: Even the hospital's main foyer and corridors have been equipped with oxygen points so that in surge situations, beds can be set up in these areas.



Figure 4b: This is an outpatient corridor and oxygen points can be seen snaking down from the ceilings.

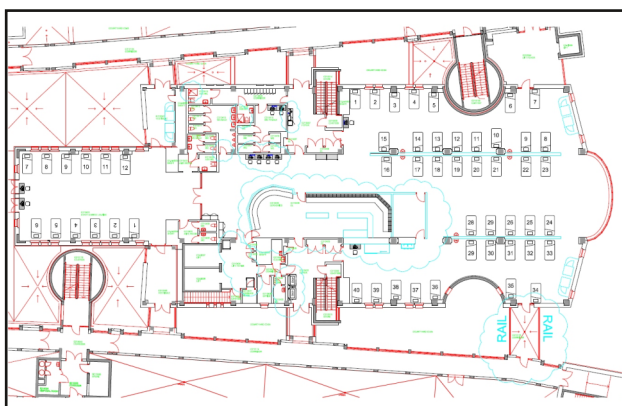


Figure 5: Detailed so-called "Escalation Plans" have been made by our engineers so as to prepare sites where extra beds can fit. This demonstrates the staff canteen layout which is shown in figure 2 of this photo-essay.



Figure 6: COVID-19 areas are all preceded by donning and doffing areas for personal protective equipment, complete with mirrors so that self-checks can be made.



Figure 7: Even lifts have had to be designated as COVID/non-COVID so as to prevent COVID-19 spread in these enclosed spaces.



Figure 8: The Cardiac Surgical Intensive Care ward forlornly waits for patients. It has been repurposed into a potential COVID-19 ICU.

To date (3rd week of May), there have only been six deaths and less than 600 cases detected despite extensive swabbing, with a swabbing rate that is estimated to be among the highest per capita in the world. [5] Thus, our exhortations to the public with regard to social distancing and hand hygiene, among other measures, appear to be working even in the absence of a total draconian lockdown.

This is fortunate as it has been calculated that if there is a surge in infections such that rates exceed more than 200 new cases detected daily, ICU ventilator capacity would be overwhelmed even with the current greatly expanded facilities.[6] It is abundantly clear that my colleagues in the Health Department have rallied magnificently. Supplies have been procured (no expenses spared), staff have

been trained and prepared, and contingencies have been planned.

The calm before the storm reminds me of my beloved Star Trek:

*“The crew has responded with the dedication I’ve come to expect from them... And like a thousand other[s] on a thousand other battlefields, I wait for the dawn.”*  
Captain Jean Luc Picard.[7]

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