

# Nursing Homes or Besieged Castles: Suicide Temptation in the Covid-19 World

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**Abstract.** In Italy, Covid-19 developed with extreme virulence, presenting by 15 April 2021 an official number of deceased individuals well above 115,000 cases. Nursing homes, neglected for too long by government administrators, have paid a very high tribute to the lack of protective measures and social distancing that Covid-19 has imposed. In just twenty days, from 7 March to 26 March 2020, over 600 deaths occurred in nursing homes in the province of Bergamo (Lombardy), with a total accommodation capacity of 6,400 beds. To date, it has been calculated that almost a quarter of all residents in nursing home in northern Italy have died due to Covid-19, with a mortality of Lombardy nursing homes varying between 10 and 50% of all residents. In some cases, 3–4 guests died in a single day, in a single nursing home. During the first phases of the pandemic, nursing homes become like castles under siege, where guests could no longer leave and new guests could no longer enter, given the spread of the infection within these institutions. Residents seemed to face fear of disease and anguish for its threatening consequences with attitudes ranging from continuous praying (a rosary to pray was a frequent request from residents) to a nihilistic form of fatalism ('I can only hope death will come without too much suffering'). Health workers wearing protections, which reminded them that the virus was highly contagious, were very frightening. Doctors felt powerless and completely disoriented. They saw their colleagues become infected and die despite protections and cautions. Doctors were unable to make good clinical predictions: some patients seemed to be seriously ill but recovered, whereas others appeared to be quite fine then died. Swab tests were initially only done in hospitals, when patients became symptomatic. In any case, since doctors and other operators

got sick in rapid progression, guests felt progressively more fearful and abandoned. During the second wave, the situation changed completely. Italian nursing homes seemed then as abandoned castles, where the virus entered and settled, causing very serious damage. They were abandoned by the governments, which gave no money to helping the survival of residences for older people. Then, citizens accused those facilities of bad governance and inadequate treatment of residents. The staff – particularly nurses – abandoned them, with some moving to public hospitals, where the salary is much higher. Finally, nursing homes were also abandoned by universities and research institutions, which neglected their need for adequate clinical care. A huge number of Italians have lost their parents or relatives that were residents of nursing homes. Guilt feelings, sense of impotence, and legal battles are characterizing the aftermath of the first and second Covid waves.