

Medical Officers On Call 24 Hours a Day to Support Members of the College

The coronavirus has changed the way people live and work at the Bundeswehr Command and Staff College. Medical officers have been answering hundreds of questions.

“When people have fears and worries, time doesn’t matter,” says Wing Commander (MC) Sascha Glistau. A few minutes later, his phone rings again. Since the first case of coronavirus was confirmed at the Bundeswehr Command and Staff College, his phone hasn’t stopped ringing. The same goes for the mobile phone of the BwCSC’s Senior Medical Officer, Colonel (MC) Dr Thorsten Schütz, who is currently in home isolation and thus has to answer all calls from home. 24 hours a day, both medical officers are available to listen to the worries and concerns of college students and staff members, their families and the employers of family members.



Senior Medical Officer Colonel (MC) Dr Thorsten Schütz (left) and Wing Commander (MC) Sascha Glistau answer questions about the coronavirus (photo collage: Bundeswehr Command and Staff College/Marie Kellermann, photos: Bundeswehr Command and Staff College)

What am I still allowed to do in times of corona? What should I not do? Can I still take care of sick relatives or family members in need of nursing care, or would I put them in danger? “These are questions that were frequently asked after the first case of coronavirus had been confirmed at the Bundeswehr Command and Staff College,” says Dr Schütz. The people who call him are looking for orientation and for some kind of guidance and advice on how to act. However, the two medical officers can only give recommendations because, as yet, no-one has any experience in dealing with this type of virus. “We have all had to learn a lot. Our students and staff come from all parts of Germany. So it was foreseeable that sooner or later we would have a case here at the College,” the Senior Medical Officer tells me. It was important to act immediately and take measures in accordance with the German Infection Protection Act. As a consequence, all teaching activities were suspended. “Our first and foremost aim has been to prevent the infection from spreading further in an uncontrolled manner,” explains Dr Schütz. The second step was to collect as much information as possible about the virus and further necessary action. The medical officers coordinated their next steps with the Supervisory Centre for Public Law Tasks of the Bundeswehr Medical Service (SC PLT BwMedS), which performs the functions of a public health office for the troops. “First of all, we had to find out who had come into contact with the infected person. We sent this information to the health inspectors at the Supervisory Centre who then reached out to all people who had been in contact with the patient in order to evaluate their individual risk,” says Wing Commander (MC) Glistau. All contact persons were placed in home isolation. About 50 students, most of them international students, have not been allowed to leave the Clausewitz Barracks since then.



Answering calls and e-mails: Senior Medical Officer Dr Thorsten Schütz is working from home these days (photo: private)

Our Aim: To Provide Information by Phone

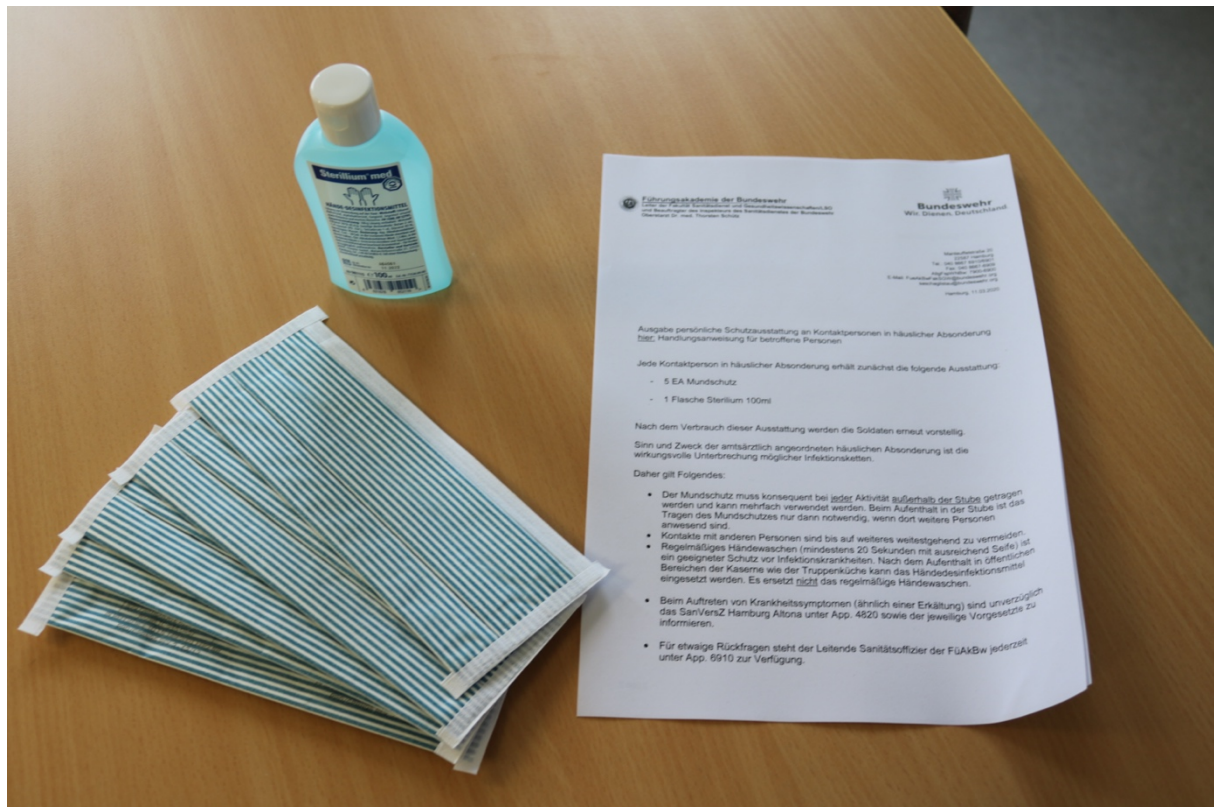
At the same time, the need for advice was rising among the military leadership, the soldiers, their families and the employers of family members. “Our job is to advise the BwCSC. We do not decide which measures to take. That's the job of the Supervisory Centre,” Dr Schütz tells me. And only the Supervisory Centre can lift those measures. The instructions issued by the Centre are binding, and this is what the two medical officers tell their callers. In the first week alone, they answered several hundred calls. “We are still working to provide information,” says Wing Commander (MC) Glistau. During their conversations, both officers have noticed that people have different perceptions of the danger the disease implies. Some seem to under-react while others seem to over-react. According to Dr Schütz, the truth probably lies somewhere in between. We are now required to act reasonably as infection numbers in Germany continue to increase dynamically. The colonel remarks: “One could say that the virus is spreading like wildfire. On average, every patient, i.e. every person who has tested positive, infects two to three other people. Moreover, the incubation period, i.e. the time between exposure to an infection and the appearance of the first symptoms, ranges from 1 to 14 days.” All respiratory tract diseases have similar symptoms, and this is what makes infections with SARS-CoV-2, as the virus is called by medical experts, so treacherous. Only a test can tell whether or not a person has contracted the virus. However, testing makes sense only if the person has developed symptoms. “The tests are not conducted to detect the virus itself but rather the body's immune reaction to it,” Wing Commander (MC) Glistau explains.



Wing Commander (MC) Sascha Glistau fills bags with disinfectants, face masks and information material for the students staying at the barracks (photo: Bundeswehr Command and Staff College/Sophie Düsing)

“The Bundeswehr Command and Staff College is Not an Island”

Eight members of the BwCSC have tested positive for the coronavirus. Further test results are expected in the next days. “We cannot assume that we have overcome the crisis already. For many members of the BwCSC, home isolation ends on 23 March 2020 at midnight. That point in time marks the end of the 14-day incubation period. Only then will we know who else might have contracted the virus,” Dr Schütz emphasizes, adding that the measures that had been taken were appropriate. However, both medical officers are aware of the fact that people can become infected with the virus even after 23 March. “The College is not an island.” The eight members of Germany’s highest-level military training institution who had tested positive for the coronavirus are at home. Considering the circumstances, they are doing well. The soldiers who are currently staying in their rooms at the barracks are allowed to move freely on the premises of the BwCSC. In the mornings, they receive lunch packages at the dining facility. They are required to wear face masks and gloves and to always keep a minimum distance from one another. Moreover, they are given snacks and beverages, and in the evenings they receive a warm meal from the All Ranks Club (Verein Gemeinsame Heimgesellschaft). For safety reasons, they are not allowed to eat their meals in the rooms of the All Ranks Club. Should another person living in the barracks contract the coronavirus during the next days, all measures would have to be stepped up even further. If that were to happen, the infected persons would no longer be allowed to leave their rooms, and their meals would also be delivered to their rooms. Wing commander (MC) Glistau explains what additional measures would have to be taken: “The form of welfare support we are offering would have to change and current freedoms would need to be further restricted.”



Contact persons staying at the barracks are given information and protection equipment (photo: Bundeswehr Command and Staff College/Sophie Düsing)

The Phone Rings Even at Night

The more time passes, the more diverse do the questions become that the two medical officers have to answer. Am I allowed to leave home isolation and go home to see my family? What can I do to get tested if one of my family members shows symptoms? Who is in charge of supplies such as deodorant, face masks and cleaning materials at the barracks? And who cleans the rooms? “People who are worried and have questions call you at any time during day or night. And we do our best to answer all their questions,” both medical officers say. Moreover, welfare services have been provided seven days a week at the barracks. “Problems or questions might arise at any time, be it at night or on a Sunday morning. It is important to offer quick solutions and help. Ensuring 24/7 availability at the barracks is one thing Master Sergeant Thomas Wachsmuth and I have been in charge of for the past ten days,” says Wing Commander (MC) Glistau. There is certainly no chance of boredom for them. For instance, they even had to perform guard duty on short notice, because the comrades who had been assigned this task were identified as contact persons. Even though the coronavirus outbreak makes their work quite a challenge these days, Colonel (MC) Dr Schütz and his team want to continue to render support wherever they can because “time doesn’t matter when people have fears and worries.”

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Additional Information

What is the difference between home isolation and quarantine?

“Home isolation is the mildest measure used to prevent contact with the outside world,” Wing Commander (MC) Glistau explains. People are allowed to perform essential activities such as buying groceries, but of course they have to observe all protective measures such as wearing face masks and washing their hands regularly. It is essential to minimize the risk of infecting others as much as possible. In particular, this means that people in home isolation must keep a distance from others and that all non-essential social contacts must be avoided. Quarantine, on the other hand, is established for persons who have tested positive for the disease. “Infected persons are not allowed to leave their homes. If these persons live alone, we may consider to accommodate them at the barracks for the duration of the home isolation in order to ensure they are supplied with all they need.” Moreover, compliance with quarantine measures must be constantly monitored. The local health authority pays visits to the people in quarantine or calls them to check whether they really are at home.