How to begin again

ROME

Italy debates use of tests for antibodies to decide who can go back to work

BY JASON HOROWITZ

There is a growing sense in Italy that the worst may have passed. The weeks of locking down the country, center of the world’s deadliest coronavirus outbreak, may be starting to pay off, as officials announced last week that the numbers of new infections had plateaued.

That glimmer of hope has turned the conversation to the daunting challenge of when and how to reopen without setting off another cataclysmic wave of contagion. To do so, Italian health officials and some politicians have focused on an idea that might once have been relegated to the realm of dystopian novels and science fiction films.

Having the right antibodies to the virus in one’s blood — a potential marker of immunity — may soon determine who gets to work and who does not, who is locked down and who is free.

That debate is in some ways ahead of the science. Researchers are uncertain, though hopeful, about whether antibodies in fact indicate immunity. But that has not stopped politicians from grasping at the idea as they come under increasing pressure to open economies and avoid inducing a widespread economic depression.

The president of the northeastern Veneto region, a conservative, has proposed a special “license” for Italians who possess antibodies that show they have had, and beaten, the virus. The former prime minister, Matteo Renzi, a liberal, has spoken about a “Covid Pass” for the uninfected.

Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte said that while the lockdown remained in place, the government had begun working with scientists to determine how to send people who have recuperated back to work.

With its echoes of a “Brave New World,” the debate about how to reopen arrived in earnest this past week in Italy. Like the virus’s crushing toll — 15,362 dead in Italy as of Saturday evening — the shift is ahead of the situation in countries like Spain, Britain and the United States, where the contagion is still on an upswing.

Italy was the first European country to announce a nationwide lockdown, which it began March 9. But the rate of new infections slowed last week — on Saturday, there were about 4,800 new cases, fewer than in recent weeks — leading officials and emergency medical workers to talk with guarded optimism.

“We are beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel,” said Fabio Arrighini, a supervisor of an ambulance hotline in the Lombardy town of Brescia, which has one of the highest death rates in Italy.

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A Milan hotel used as a coronavirus quarantine area. Some officials in Italy have suggested creating a license to allow people who have antibodies for the virus to work.

A BAN ON CRISIS LIKE NO OTHER

The effect of the coronavirus outbreak on European banks exceeds even worst-case scenarios. PAGE 10

CARIBBEAN SUFERS A HEAVY BLOW

The pandemic has put global tourism in peril, but no region depends more heavily on visitors. PAGE 11
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ly. “The calls have gone down.”

But the debate over an antibody-based work force has once again placed Italy at the vanguard among Western democracies grappling with the virus, its uncomfortable ethical choices and its inevitable aftermath. Such questions have already been raised by the wrenching decisions of doctors to treat the young, with a better chance of life, before the old and sick.

But at some stage, nearly all governments will have to strike a balance between ensuring public safety and getting their countries running again. They may also find themselves weighing what is best for society against individual rights, using biological criteria in ways that almost certainly would be rejected absent the current emergency.

“It looks like it splits humanity into two, the strong and the weak,” said Michela Marzano, a professor of moral philosophy at the Paris Descartes University. “But this is actually the case.”

From an ethical perspective, she argued, the question of using antibodies as a basis for free movement reconciles a utilitarian vision of what is best for society with respect for individual humanity by protecting “the most fragile, not marginalizing them.”

“It’s not discriminating,” she said. “It’s protecting.”

Scientists in Italy, like their counterparts in Germany, the United States, China and beyond, are already studying whether antibodies are a potential source of protection or immunity from the virus.

China has slowly reopened its economy, focusing on preventing another wave of infection arriving from overseas. In New York, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo has envisioned a strategy in which younger people, and people who have antibodies showing they have been cured of the virus, can go back to work.

The British government has floated the idea of “immunity passports,” though it is still struggling to complete even swab tests for an accurate snapshot of current infection levels, and the virus has not been present long enough in the British population to provide enough antibody data.

Italy, by dint of its early and widespread exposure to the virus, has an opportunity to gain insight into how the virus works and the biological properties that protect against it.

This week, Veneto plans to begin collecting 100,000 blood samples from people across the region — first from thousands of health care workers and then from public employees — to study in lab the antibodies of people who have had the virus and those who have been infected with a single case of “a person who got better and got reinfection,” he and his colleagues appear confident about the potential of antibodies.

The antibodies in healed Italians could be a valuable tool in determining who could safely exit quarantine to work, Dr. Crisanti said.

He argued that Vò presented ideal conditions for antibody and genome testing.

“The good thing about Vò is that this is a community that has been in place for several hundreds of years and with probably very little mixing,” he said, giving a clearer genetic picture.

Giuliano Martini, the mayor of Vò, said that he and his town were grateful for the aggressive testing, which potentially saved hundreds of lives.

Once the central government in Rome lifted an initial quarantine on Vò in the beginning of March, Mr. Martini said, the comprehensive testing identified people who were infected but asymptomatic and kept them from spreading the disease.

Putting the town at the disposal of researchers looking to learn more about the virus and its antibodies is “the least we can do,” he said.

“We have to recognize this effort done for us by making ourselves available for future tests,” he said, adding that the town continued to be a gold standard in Italy for active surveillance, and that “we know the name and surname” of all the people who remain in quarantine.

For residents reluctant to take part in the new study, which he acknowledged is more intrusive, as it is a blood test, he said, “We go see them in their homes and convince them.”

“There isn’t going to be any problem for this second test,” he said. “It’s an additional check on them, it can’t be anything but positive.”

But the outcomes may not be great news for individuals who, potentially under the law, will remain marginalized from society.

In Veneto, Mr. Zaia has proposed that Italians who have the antibodies showing they no longer have the virus could obtain a “license” that allows them to move around the country and work.

Dr. Luisa Becaci Laiuerno, an immunologist at the Italian National Research Council, said that the antibodies “should be protective. We all hope they are, but we don’t have the mathematical certainty.”

But because Italy was further along in cases, researchers are able to track many patients over a long period of time to determine if immunity has developed.

“We find ourselves being a bit of a laboratory,” she said.

Emma Bubola contributed reporting from Verona, Italy.
A hospital in Bergamo, Italy. The country, by dint of its early exposure to the coronavirus, has an opportunity to gain insight into the biological properties that protect against it.

A funeral home in Milan. More than 15,000 people have died from the coronavirus in Italy, which was the first European country to announce a nationwide lockdown.

Disinfecting the Duomo square in Milan. At some stage, governments will have to strike a balance between ensuring public safety and getting their countries running again.