

Coronavirus pandemic

Italian blood samples revive debate over first signs of Covid in Europe

New research suggests coronavirus could have been in Italy in October 2019 but is not conclusive



A pedestrian walks past the Colosseum in Rome. Italy has been hard-hit by the coronavirus pandemic © Bloomberg

Donato Paolo Mancini in Athens YESTERDAY

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Renewed tests of blood samples collected in Italy as early as October 2019 have revived a debate over whether coronavirus was circulating in Europe before Chinese authorities confirmed the first case in Wuhan.

Scientists from Milan's Istituto Nazionale Tumori, a cancer research centre, wrote in a [new paper](#), published on Monday, that retesting of a small number of pre-pandemic blood samples by two laboratories had indicated the presence of antibodies normally observed after coronavirus infections.

"The results of this retesting suggest that what we previously reported in asymptomatic patients is a plausible signal of early circulation of the virus in Italy," Giovanni Apolone, one of the researchers, told the Financial Times.

"If this is confirmed, this would explain the explosion of symptomatic cases observed in Italy [in 2020]. Sars-Cov-2, or an earlier version, circulated silently, under the surface," he said.

The Italian researchers originally screened 959 individuals for lung cancer before the pandemic. Last year they tested the samples again, looking for coronavirus-linked antibodies, and said they had found traces of infection.

At the request of the World Health Organization those samples were retested by the VisMederi laboratory in Siena, Italy, and a WHO-affiliated facility at Erasmus University in the Netherlands.