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Scientists say Italy's 'patient zero' may be from Germany

A team of scientists in Milan believes Italy's coronavirus epidemic might have come to the country via Germany and not directly from China as many experts initially assumed.

Scientists have been hunting for the so-called "patient zero" ever since the contagion first came to light in the prosperous northern region of Lombardy on February 21.

After extensive analysis, the Milan team has not yet identified the individual at the root of the worst outbreak in Europe, but they have matched the Italian genetic sequencing of the virus here to a case that emerged in Germany in January.

"The sequence closest to the base of the branch, which is the one that probably precedes the others, came from a person infected in Munich in all likelihood between January 19 and 22," said Massimo Galli, head of the university research group and of the infectious-diseases department at Milan's Sacco hospital.

Galli added that the German patient had caught the virus after contacting someone who came from Shanghai. He said their analysis showed that the Italian outbreak must have started between January 25 and 26, well before the first patient was officially diagnosed in the northern town of Codogno.

"We can imagine that a person who contracted the virus in the context of those infected in Munich came to Italy and the area where the virus first spread without showing any symptoms," Galli told Reuters.

Italy is the worst-affected country in the world after China, with 827 deaths and 12,462 confirmed cases in almost three weeks.

Doctors initially believed the Codogno patient, a 38-year-old man named Mattia, had been infected by a colleague who had recently returned from a business trip in China. However, that man tested negative, meaning the hunt was on for the origin of the contagion.

Source(s): Reuters