

Warnings over doctor shortages amid Italian health reforms

As the Italian Health Ministry plans changes to primary care, health workers associations warn of a shortage of staff. *Marta Paterlini reports.*



Health worker associations in Italy are warning of a shortage of doctors due to unprecedented generational changes in the profession. Retirements are peaking—following the COVID-19 pandemic and increasing burnout—and low numbers of new doctors are entering the health service. The major Italian general practitioner (GP) association (FIMMG) has said that as of Jan 1, 2021, there were 40 769 GPs in the country, but 3000 GPs will retire each year, thus 31% of these professionals will be out of primary health care by 2024.

“This is the result of a poor programming that we have been denouncing for 15 years”, said Filippo Anelli, President of the National Federation of Orders of Surgeons and Dentists (FNOMCeO). “The country is ageing and the number of people with multiple chronic pathologies is increasing; therefore, the victim of [the] GPs shortage will be the health of the Italians”.

Silvestro Scotti, National Secretary General of FIMMG, told *The Lancet* “We see a stagnation of generational turnover, because those who can retire do so while medicine students are not attracted to general practice”, blaming the regional variation in GP training and the fact that training is less well paid than standard medical specialisations at universities. “Soon, many municipalities will run out of doctors”, he said.

The shortage comes amid reforms—termed DM71—to the primary health-care service in Italy. €7 billion (from the EU’s National Recovery and Resilience Plan) is to be spent in 5 years to implement a new model based around local health centres—so-called Community Homes—in which general practice will be combined with facilities for

laboratory testing and diagnostics. Family doctors, specialists, nurses and social workers, and administrators will be brought together under one roof, each centre providing care for 50 000 citizens. The reforms will also provide for 380 community hospitals

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and enhanced telemedicine and digitalisation. Following concerns that traditional local doctors’ offices might disappear and the effects this would have on access to health care for older patients and those with restricted mobility, the Minister of Health, Roberto Speranza, announced that offices of family doctors would remain independent in a spoke-and-hub model with the community homes.

Although they agree that reform is necessary, FNOMCeO, FIMMG, and ANAAO ASSOMED (the biggest trade union for doctors), are concerned over the resources available for the changes, and whether the health workforce will be available to staff the community homes. “The whole health-care system is close to collapse”, says Costantino Troise, National Secretary of ANAAO ASSOMED. “Patients fill emergency rooms because they do not have any referral locally. The system needs an urgent intervention that enhances the resources and availability of health facilities on the front line. We do not need new empty buildings”, he said, warning that without investment in human capital, the reforms would be hollow.

According to Alessandro Nobili, Researcher in Health Policy, Mario Negri Institute, the reaction to the reforms is not encouraging. “In

addition to the reluctance from the main Italian general practice associations, clear rules on the implementation of the community homes are lacking”, he said, arguing that an extensive evaluation of districts and hospitals should have been done to understand needs and demand. “Instead of bringing health care closer to citizens, we risk alienating it”, says Scotti.

Raffaele Donini, coordinator of the Health Commission of the Conference of Regions, states that the number of internships in general medicine has increased, from less than 1000 posts per year to 2500, to which 900 more scholarships for the next 3 years are to be added, thanks to additional EU funds. “It is still necessary to wait a few years before we see the positive effects of this intervention, but the road has been paved” he said. The Ministry of Health says that they are investing in the health workforce, including €1 billion in the annual budget for recruitment. “For the first time in history, the financing of health personnel is outside the expenditure ceiling. We are finally taking an important step forward”, said a Ministry press officer.

Marta Paterlini

