

Report from Rome by Vittorio Bollesin

Twenty AIDS cases in nursery schools

The situation explodes in the north Italian city of Vicenza. When will it blow up in Milan, Rome, Bologna, or Naples?

On Oct. 18, the auditorium of the Astra movie theater in Vicenza is overflowing with furious mothers: They want to be sure that their babies are not infected by the Plague of the 21st century, AIDS. "You left us in a situation of intolerable ignorance." "You cannot use our children as guinea pigs." Boos, shouts, and insults are directed at the Public Education Commissioner of the City of Vicenza Marino Quaresin, the head of the infectious diseases department of San Bartolo Hospital, Prof. Giuseppe Ielasi, and other speakers.

The truth, which had been kept hidden for many months by the "AIDS lobby," has exploded in the quiet city near Venice, known until now for the Renaissance palaces of Palladio. Let us try to reconstruct what happened.

A few weeks ago, the health authorities of Vicenza, an industrial town of about 100,000, had the courage to begin doing clinical tests on the children who attended two nursery schools: the San Rocco, which is also an orphanage, and the Dal Sasso. This was all perfectly normal. The bombshell went off when local laboratory analysts and a teacher revealed that two children at the San Rocco orphanage/nursery school and one from Dal Sasso had been declared "healthy carriers" of HTLV-III, commonly known as the AIDS virus. The number turned out to be 20, out of 500 tested.

When the news got out, all hell broke loose.

Vicenza's health authorities called a meeting to attempt to calm down the

parents of the children who attended the two nursery schools in question, but it had the opposite effect. A thousand parents protested because they felt shut out: "It is intolerable that the personnel of the two nursery schools were informed, but we were not," and, "They did not inform us about what they had decided—they kept us in the dark." The Vicenza mothers are repeating the same protest phenomenon that started a couple of years ago in the United States.

When doctors present tried to pass off the line that AIDS is not transmittable in day-care or school environments and that it is contagious only for "high-risk categories," one parent produced a clipping from the *Washington Post*, which reported on the battle won by a group of parents in Los Angeles who succeeded in expelling from a nursery school a child infected with AIDS who had bitten one of his schoolmates. The crowd in the Astra theater was in no mood to listen to quotes from luminaries denying the risks of "casual" transmission.

But it is not necessary to go all the way to Los Angeles to discover that AIDS-infected children have been preventively distanced from nursery schools. In Campli, a village in the boondocks near Teramo in south-central Italy, Mayor Edmondo Di Pietro removed Robertino, a five-year-old boy infected with AIDS who was attending the local day-care center, after parental protests. The child had apparently become infected from his parents, who were drug-addicts.

In Vicenza, what most enraged parents was the total absence of politicians at the meeting. They not only kept the extent of the damage hidden, and took not one single emergency health measure—they did not even show up. The local politicians' attitude reflects the national one. The *National Epidemiological Bulletin* of March 6, 1986, published by the Italian Ministry of Health, explains why the politicians were absent:

"... In the case of children who are healthy carriers of the virus, they can be permitted access to every type of schooling, including nursery schools," and they must be "guaranteed their anonymity, as it is not recognized as necessary to inform the parents of the other children." This incredibly irresponsible statement is echoed by the Health Office of the City of Milan, where Prof. Carlo Volpato stated his reaction to the Vicenza situation. "The phenomenon of baby-AIDS exists in Milan but it is better not to discuss it." Why? "If we were to say which schools, we would unleash general panic." Professor Volpato has gone further, to stonewall against universal testing in the Milan schools: "We cannot impose such tests, because they would be anti-constitutional."

On the contrary, Article 32 of the Italian constitution states: "The Republic safeguards health as a fundamental right of the individual and interest of the collectivity, and guarantees free treatment to the indigent..."

The Italian state ought to launch a "crash" health and science program and a serious information campaign on the AIDS problem. As the protesting mothers of Vicenza said at the Astra movie theater: "Not all the doctors are in agreement that the danger is nonexistent."