

## Report from Rome by Marco Fanini

### AIDS cases multiply in Italy

*Thanks to the cost-cutting climate imposed by the International Monetary Fund, no concrete steps have been taken.*

The top Italian expert on AIDS, Prof. Ferdinando Aiuti, has reported to the press that, according to a document of the Interior Ministry, Italy will have between 5,000 and 10,000 persons with full-blown AIDS by 1988. This means that the government has foreseen a very grave danger of epidemic, yet nothing concrete is being done to stop AIDS.

Some proposals made by cabinet ministers still seem far from being implemented. Interior Minister Scalfaro proposed making AIDS cases reportable. Health Minister Carlo Donat Cattin proposed mandatory testing for AIDS of prisoners being released from jail.

Speaking for the academic medical profession, Prof. Carlo Vetere, general director of public hygiene in the Health Ministry, criticized Donat Cattin's proposal as a "multi-billion-lira exorcism which however would not resolve the AIDS problem." Prof. Donato Greco reported at a recent convention in Milan that Donat Cattin called a meeting of experts to discuss a national plan, on the basis of proposals made by the Higher Institute of Health for "coordination and surveillance of initiatives." Unfortunately, the position of the experts is close to that cited by Professor Vetere, i.e., that nothing can be done against AIDS except to educate the public on the need to use condoms and clean syringes.

Italy currently registers about 500 "confirmed" AIDS cases, and at least 150,000 infected—low estimates cal-

culated not to alarm people. The number is said to double every five months, or more likely, every three months. Even by these conservative figures, it is clear that by the end of 1987 the number of AIDS-sick persons will surpass 5,000 and be closer to 10,000. According to Professor Aiuti, 75% of Italian drug addicts are infected, a figure that has been confirmed by samples taken all over Italy.

Officially Italy has 100,000 drug addicts, although unofficially there is talk of about 250,000. On the basis of the drug-addicted "high-risk" population alone, the number of AIDS-infected would far surpass the 150,000 officially estimated. Moreover, the drug addict, because of the destruction of his immunological apparatus through drugs, tends to be turned from a "healthy carrier" of the virus into an AIDS-sick person in a shorter than average period, i.e., 1-2 years.

Another very worrisome element is determined by what an Italian expert, Professor Moroni, called "the risk chain." At a recent conference organized in Milan by the Italian Microbiologists Association, Dr. Clumeck of the Free University in Brussels told of a person who died of AIDS, who before dying provided the names of 12 girls who had had sexual relations with him in the last period of his life. All 12, once they were tracked down, were seropositive for AIDS. Professor Moroni reported on a girl being treated in Milan who infected other youth, who in turn, it is believed, may have infected many other girls.

At the cited Milan meeting Prof. Jean-Claude Chermann of the Pasteur Institute underlined the extreme fallibility of present AIDS tests, and the huge financial speculation made on them. He proposed that management of the tests be entrusted to a European commission. This proposal, while interesting, is inadequate: As Chermann knows, the only test capable of identifying the virus in cells and not only the presence of antibodies, is that carried out with the flow cytometer, a machine which exists but is not commercially available, for reasons linked to lack of investment.

The Italians are reacting with more and more distrust of the authorities on the AIDS issue. A recent poll taken in Turin and Novara was made public by the Institute of Psychosomatic Medicine on Nov. 6. Of 1,000 citizens polled, 35% asked for the isolation of infected persons, 22% said they favored having infected persons carry identification, 37% said they were convinced of the possibility of "casual" contagion, 16% said they chose what bars and restaurants to patronize based on the clientele, 26% demanded more morality, and finally, 27% saw the solution to the problem in more research.

The problem in Italy, as elsewhere, is not that there are too many experts, but indeed, too few, because there is no "crash" program, and because the experts are not interdisciplinary in their approach. Under tremendous pressure, the "experts" have become a group that talks only to itself.

The problem does not start with the scientists but with international institutions that have decreed health care cost-prohibitive. In the case of Italy, the International Monetary Fund has repeatedly intervened to demand cuts in health services, and the scientists end up fighting each other for diminishing funds.