

Report from Rome by Marco Fanini

Government mandates AIDS reporting

Over the howls of the homosexual lobby, the first steps are being taken; but Italy's actions against AIDS are still contradictory.

In a recent interview, Italian Health Minister Carlo Donat Cattin blasted the homosexual lobby, which in Italy is organized by the Communist Party in a front group called "Archi Gay." Donat Cattin said: "These people are not only homosexuals, they are also maniacs. Do they imagine that the health minister should make propaganda for anal intercourse and prophylactics?"

The homosexual lobby denounced these comments as slander and ascribed the minister's views to typical prejudices of the Christian Democratic Party, to which Donat Cattin belongs, "prejudices" reinforced by the recent letter to the bishops by Cardinal Ratzinger, condemning homosexuality as "morally unacceptable."

It is highly probable that the position on AIDS taken by two Christian Democratic ministers, Interior Minister Oscar Scalfaro, and Donat Cattin, was influenced by the Vatican. The fact is that in Italy, some first steps have begun to be taken to deal with AIDS.

Officially—and these figures are quite imprecise—Italy has 520 AIDS patients and around 200,000 people infected. With a rate of infection approaching 80% in high-risk groups, the actual number of infected can be reckoned at well over a half million. Italy has over 1 million drug addicts. In Naples, as the noted virologist Prof. Fernanda Bergamini has pointed out, drug consumption is very high, yet the official number of AIDS cases there is under 10.

The Health Ministry has set up a national commission of experts led by Undersecretary of Health Gualtiero Nepi, with a 50 billion-lira budget, divided as follows: 10 billion liras for an information drive, 10 billion liras to create regional therapeutic centers, 10 billion for medical research on AIDS, and the rest for study trips abroad. Additionally, the minister has asked the minister of the Mezzogiorno (Italy's south) to allocate from his budget over the next decade, 12,000 billion liras to build AIDS hospitals.

On research, Donat Cattin has repeatedly told the press: "The scientists should not worry about money. What is needed will be found. That's my job." But there are heated objections to the small size of the allocation, only 50 billion. It has been noted that the Italian government earmarked 12 times that, 600 billion liras, for the world soccer championship in Italy in 1990.

The key public health measures announced concern mandatory reporting of AIDS cases. On Jan. 13, the health minister stated that mandatory reporting will also include cases of people infected by the AIDS virus. This makes it clear that the Italian government has implemented the first part of the much-denigrated Proposition 64 on last November's California ballot.

The government has also ordered a form of quarantine for sick or AIDS-infected children in the kindergartens. These children will attend special day-care centers built for this purpose. Many American journalists will scream "ghettoization," but that is not

the Italian government's view.

On testing, the minister said: "Every region should have the ability to give tests free of charge. It is unacceptable that there are endless waiting lines with people who want to take a test." The health minister of the Lombardy region (where the capital, Milan, is one of the cities most hit by the AIDS epidemic) said at a meeting organized by the Schiller Institute in Brescia on Dec. 19, that probably the same procedures used during the 1950s to fight syphilis will be followed now with AIDS patients.

In the 1950s, all state employees had to present the results of the Wasserman test, certifying they were not infected by syphilis.

On Jan. 12, the newspaper *Il Messaggero* published the results of an investigation in private clinics in Milan, which showed that an increasing number of industries and companies require AIDS tests of their employees. Some foreign companies based in Italy demand that potential employees take the test before they are given a job.

The Italian government's position is quite contradictory. It will require isolation for AIDS-infected children in day-care centers, but not in the schools or prisons or at the workplace. Undoubtedly, the measures were taken in response to the shocking results recently found in one nursery school in Vicenza, where there were 20 children infected, and in Padua where there were 60 children infected at several kindergartens.

In Italy the "party of mothers" is still the strongest; therefore, the government had to take into account the growing concern. It is easy to foresee that with a worse situation—doubling of AIDS cases every six months—the resistance of the government to mandatory testing and quarantine will be dropped.