



## DIALOGUE

### NO MORE “BUSINESS AS USUAL”

The Covid-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of primary health care and its local availability and delivery in order to meet the needs of communities as effectively as possible. In their absence there are adverse consequences not only for those who are sick, but also for the doctors who care for them.

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The current pandemic has revealed the most flawed and inefficient aspects of Italy's health care and support system, most notably local health services as a whole, from public sanitation to primary health care to family medicine. The lack of a local “filter” to identify infected individuals, their household members and other close contacts – the very ABC of public health – treating them at home whenever possible and sending them to hospitals only when necessary, generated confusion in the population and panic among patients, caused hospitals to collapse and, in certain areas – including the provinces of Bergamo and Brescia – led to some of the world's highest Covid-19 mortality rates.

The most glaring failings within local health care systems were seen, in fact, in the Lombardy region, as described by Milena Gabanelli and Milena Ravizza in the *Corriere della Sera* on 15 April 2020: “Over the years the general and district practitioners network, which plays a crucial role in detecting a patient's symptoms at the onset and preventing them from degenerating, has been dismantled. The last fifty days have seen a steady stream of reports in Lombardy about patients arriving at hospitals in already desperate conditions. For weeks now, family doctors have been left on their own, with some risking their lives – and many dying – to take care of their patients, and others leaving the ill to fend for themselves, advising them to take Tachipirina (an Italian brand name for paracetamol), per the suggestion of virologists, and stay at home.” “If we hadn't made such drastic cuts to healthcare spending”, another *Corriere della Sera* article asserted on 4 May 2020, “we would not have been forced to take measures that have put us at risk of as-yet-unknown economic, political and social consequences. Had we had the resources that Germany, for example, has, we could have avoided shutting everything down for so long, and letting people die due to insufficient space, staffing and equipment”<sup>1</sup>.

“The first to bring up the issue of the neglect of local health care systems were our colleagues from Codogno, who were left on their own for the first two weeks of the viral storm, and paid the price in terms of lost lives.” Thus begins a damning letter issued and signed by sixty Lombardy-based family doctors to denounce the region's health policies. “The attempt to introduce a logic of competition to local health systems – for example, pitting primary care and hospital care against one another in terms of which would manage chronic patients – has laid bare the limits of the quasi-market and hospital-centered care management. Attesting to the fact that regional policies have been guided by this quasi-market “philosophy” are a series of decisions reflecting a general disregard for primary health care, for example, the failure to activate associative forms of general medicine and the abandonment of local health systems with the closure of district facilities.

In the entire history of medicine, it is difficult to find policy choices that have had such catastrophic effects on the health of a population. It took an exceptional event – a pandemic like this one – to so rapidly expose their momentous impact, dramatically underscoring the point that no country can do without a solid primary health care system, as reiterated by a recently-published OECD report entitled “Realizing the Potential of Primary Health Care”. The report asserts that OECD health systems faced major challenges even before the Covid-19 pandemic, due to aging populations, the spread of chronic diseases and people's growing expectations with regard to health services. “The rapid spread of Covid-19” – it states – has “added complexity to these challenges, given both the surge in demand for treatment of the acutely ill and the need to continue to deliver preventive care and manage chronic patients. In this context, primary health care plays a key role for health systems to deliver more and better services.”

“Remembering means pondering, with seriousness and exactitude, over what has failed to work, systemic shortcomings, and errors that must not be repeated”. These are the words spoken by Italy's President, Sergio Mattarella, on Sunday, 28 June 2020, at Bergamo's monumental cemetery. “Remembering,” he added, “means first of all remembering those we have lost, but also becoming fully cognizant of what has happened, and not giving into the temptation of putting these terrible months out of mind to return to business as usual”.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> <https://salutedirittofondamentale.it/silenzio-degli-innocenti/#note>