

A New Opportunity for Autism: The First Specific Italian Law

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Introduction

Autism is now recognized as an urgent public health concern with dramatically increased frequencies seen across Western countries [1]. In addition, these disorders negatively impact on the quality of life for both patients and their families. It has been estimated that the total lifetime societal cost of caring for one individual with autism is about \$3.2 million US dollars [2].

In this month an important event has been happened for autism. In Italy, the first Italian law on autism has been approved by the Parliament: "Provisions relating to diagnosis, treatment and habilitation of people with autism spectrum disorders and family assistance" [3].

The text provides measures designed to ensure the protection of health, improvement of living conditions and the inclusion in the social life of people with autism spectrum disorders.

The new law has three major points:

1) Promotion and supporting by the Ministry of Health research in autism biology and genetics, for better understanding the causes of the disease and identify possible medical treatment and rehabilitation to help people with autism.

2) Each three years the National Institute of Health will update the guidelines on the treatment of autism spectrum disorders, from children to adults, on the basis of evolving science.

3) The inclusion of autism in the Essential Levels for Care (ELC). These ELC comprise all activities, services and benefits that the National Health Service (NHS) provides to all citizens free of charge or with payment of a ticket, regardless of income and place of permanent address [4,5].

This point is very important. Indeed, unlike what happens today, the parents of a child/teenager with autism have the right to demand free care and assistance and, in the event that the local health service does not deliver the assistance, could, through a judge, to get them right.

In addition, beyond the early detection of the disorder, the performance also refers to the multidisciplinary evaluation, the

preparation of a personalized therapeutic and rehabilitation program, through the entire network of services provided to the child and his family, and the continuity of the care in the transition to the adult age.

We consider this law positive; however, unfortunately, it only seems to turn the spotlight on the autism disease, whose incidence is still increasing. In Italy, one in 150 children is currently affected.

But for those that autism live every day, it appears as a law made only of good intentions that can not materialize because of lack of financial funds. Indeed, no additional grants were allocated. Even scientific research will be affected without funding. And without funding, a law can say a lot, but can achieve very little things.

The Italian Regions (in Italy the health care service is provided by the Regions) will have to ensure the health care services, identify coordination centers and "to establish the diagnostic, treatment and care for children and adults with autistic disorder, as well as verify its evolution". Training of health workers and the creation of projects to support the families have been also planned. However, no new funds can guarantee these goals.

What we see, every day, are the cuts to the economic contributions for rehabilitation therapies, recommended in the Guidelines but not paid by the Health Service, long waiting lists for treatment provided by the NHS, families "forced" to turn to private therapists to give their children a chance of rehabilitation and social integration.

However, we consider this law as a first opening to the Autism: a world that must be part of the world and not a world apart.

References

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