



Italy to expand care for eating disorders after protests

Nationwide demonstrations took place after the Health Ministry cut funding for anorexia and bulimia, but activists remain sceptical. Marta Paterlini reports.

For the **interview with Schillaci** see https://www.corriere.it/politica/24_gennaio_20/ministro-schillaci-per-disturbi-alimentari-fondi-saranno-strutturali-2023-speso-solo-3percento-150f69f4-b7cb-11ee-85fb-9c1176b99ad5.shtml

For the **2024 Budget Law** see <https://www.quotidianosanita.it/allegati/allegato1703851949.pdf> (in Italian)

Italy's Health Minister Orazio Schillaci has promised that a raft of new services for patients with eating disorders will be provided by the country's National Health Service, following nationwide protests over cuts to funding. In an interview with the *Corriere della Sera* newspaper, Schillaci stated his intention to revamp the Essential Levels of Care (*Livelli Essenziali di Assistenza*)—the list of services and benefits that the National Health Service is required to provide to all citizens—to include psychotherapy, family therapy, electrocardiograms, and bone density scans for patients with eating disorders. It is the first update to the list since 2017. Schillaci has promised €50 million in 2024 and €200 million in 2025 to fund the new services.

On January 19, protesters coloured the streets in lilac, the colour representing eating disorders, in 27 cities throughout Italy. The protests formed in response to the fears of patients, associations of patients' families, and professionals that centres for treatment of eating disorders were at risk of shutting down following the quiet removal of a €25 million national fund for eating disorders in the 2024 Budget Law. On Jan 17, with the protests imminent, Schillaci announced to parliament his plans to refinance an emergency fund for eating disorders established by the former Government. That fund provided €15 million for 2022 and €10 million for 2023 and was established after an alarming growth in the number of patients during COVID-19 (diagnoses of anorexia and bulimia doubled between 2019 and 2023, according to the Ministry of Health). 3 million people in Italy are undergoing treatment for these disorders, with 8500 new cases per

year. 3158 patients with anorexia and bulimia died in 2022 in Italy, making it the second highest cause of death in adolescents.

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The aims of the emergency fund were to ensure basic and consistent care across the country as well as to improve early diagnosis, through recruitment of staff, and promotion of education and training for health-care professionals and families. “Although not sufficient, the emergency fund was the first important signal and was making a difference, allowing the consolidation of existing centres, like ours, and the implementation of outpatient clinics locally where missing”, said Marinella Di Stani, a psychiatrist specialised in eating disorders and Director of a mental health centre in Ravenna, Emilia Romagna. 70% of patients can recover, but timely, multidisciplinary (including psychiatrists, nutritionists, endocrinologists, and gastroenterologists) and evidence-based treatment is needed, she said. Di Stani, who advises the Ministry of Health on eating disorders, welcomed the inclusion of services for eating disorders in the new Essential Levels of Care. “The silent voice of our patients is becoming louder, and this is a huge novelty in Italy. However, this is not enough, our sector needs structural resources independent from the yearly Budget Law.”

Leonardo Mendolicchio, a psychiatrist and Director of the the Eating Disorders and Nutrition

Rehabilitation Operational Unit at Hospital Piancavallo in Verbania, northern Italy, warns that funding alone is not enough. “Eating disorders are a major health emergency in our country. It is not only a matter of resources, but of having a strategic plan, that is missing.” According to Mendolicchio, the inclusion of new services in the Essential Levels of Care is meaningless when centres are either full or not enough centres are available where appropriate diagnoses can be made earlier. Protesters complain that there are cities or regions still without local outpatient centres dedicated to eating disorders, especially in the south of the country. “Most of the time it is still very difficult to seek first help since the health-care system works at a local level. If I live in an area of Rome with a local psychiatric unit without eating disorder care, for example, I cannot easily ask for a visit in a different area of the city, [and this is] even more difficult in another city or region”, said Maruska Albertazzi, a journalist and former patient who helped to organise the protests.

Stefano Tavilla is also a leading activist in the Lilac movement. His 17-year-old daughter died while waiting to enter an inpatient facility to receive treatment for bulimia. He said that more specialised centres for patients with eating disorders are needed. Activists point out that the 2021 Budget Law made provisions to establish services specifically for eating disorders rather than simply for psychiatric services more broadly. “This law was never implemented”, said Tavilla, “there is no political will”.

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