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News

Italian doctors can report illegal immigrants to police, under proposed law

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Milan. A law that will allow health professionals to report to the authorities any patient whom they suspect of being an illegal immigrant has been proposed by the Italian centre right government led by Silvio Berlusconi.

Until now health professionals have been barred from reporting patients to the police, except in well defined cases in which evidence indicates a direct involvement in a crime.

But the "security package" approved last week by the Italian Senate, despite widespread criticism, overturns the previous ban, stating that doctors are free to report those they suspect may be living illegally in the country.

"It's the end of professional confidentiality," said Kostas Moschochoritis, director general of the charity Medecins Sans Frontieres in Italy.

The measure was sponsored in particular by the Lega Nord (Northern League), whose representatives have led many xenophobic campaigns in recent years and who are now pushing to introduce a specific new law to punish those illegally entering the country.

"I think the national health service must engage in opposing illegal immigration," the undersecretary of health, Francesca Martini, told the press after the Senate vote. "This is my opinion, then the doctors will be free to decide for themselves."

She added, "This will not weaken the mandate of the health service, as medical treatment will still be guaranteed for all."

Many medical societies, trade unions, and other groups have protested against the new measure. "This rule goes against medical ethics and the basic principles of public health," said Amedeo Bianco, president of the National Federation of the Medical Orders.

Giacomo Milillo, secretary of the National Federation of General Practitioners, had similar objections. "For fear of being denounced and expelled from the country, clandestine immigrants might prefer to stay away from hospitals and practices," he said. This might increase the risk of outbreaks of infectious disease, he added.

After doctors made several calls to be allowed to register their conscientious objection to the law, the government made it clear that doctors would not be obliged to report suspected illegal immigrants but would simply be allowed to do so. Critics replied that this would make no difference, because even the possibility of being reported might deter many people from seeking care.

Gynaecologists and paediatricians were also worried about the health of women and children. "This will put children especially at risk," the Italian Pediatrics Society said in a statement. It invited members not to report patients.

The presidents of the Italian Society of Gynaecology and Obstetrics and the Association of Hospital Gynaecologists and Obstetricians also took a strong position against the proposed law. "We will not denounce patients," said Giorgio Vittori and Giovanni Monni in a joint statement, "but this rule has already resulted in scaring people despite our reassurances."

Some regions have already announced that they will follow the example set by Apulia, where Governor Nichi Vendola, from the centre left Democratic party, made it clear that regional health authorities will not renew contracts with doctors who report their patients.

The new bill, already passed by the Senate, is due to be discussed by the lower house, the Chamber of Deputies, which has to approve it before it can become law. The government has a strong majority in both houses.

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