

## A gender-specific health archive and information centre opens in Brescia

An interview with

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*Annalisa Voltolini talks to us about the new gender-specific health archive and information centre, for the implementation of a local gender-specific medicine scheme as a model for the appropriateness and individualisation of healthcare, in order to provide services that are made-to-measure for men and women in their living environment by forming a network of know-how.*

### How did the Centre come to be?

For the past four years, I have been in charge of raising awareness amongst the healthcare staff of the hospital where I work as an orthopaedic specialist and where I am the contact person for gender-specific medicine, by organising education and training initiatives that have led, for example, to the creation of gender-oriented diagnostic and therapeutic pathways.

I am firmly convinced that dedicating attention to gender differences represents a huge opportunity for improving the health of all individuals and for increasing the sustainability of healthcare and that, there-

fore, it is strategic to diffuse gender-specific medicine and to make it operative throughout the local area, including by trying to involve general practitioners.

The idea of creating an Archive open to the community, healthcare professionals, the public, the institutions and associations in order to favour the application and diffusion of gender-specific medicine developed during a conversation I had with one of my colleagues, Dr Donatella Albini, a gynaecologist and Brescia Municipal Authority's Councillor for Health.

With the contribution made by other women, within just a few months, the project had taken shape and become a reality: Dr Elisabetta Donati, a sociologist and chair of Fondazione Casa Industria, a non-profit nursing home, provided us with furnished facilities (an office, conference room and two courtyards for summer events) at the headquarters of the Foundation, an historical building in the city centre; two more friends, in their capacity as the Chairs of the Brescia section of Soroptimist International d'Italia, and of the Gruppo italiano per la lotta alla sclerodermia [Italian Group for the prevention and treatment of Scleroderma] (GILS), provided the first funds needed to open the Centre. The Catholic University dedicated the project a number of hours of one of its researchers, Dr Caterina Braga, for the opening and running of the Centre.

Very soon, a number of other hospital and university colleagues, with a vast range of specialisations, agreed to cooperate as unpaid volunteers; they included the research supervisor appointed by the Rector of the public University and the teaching and residency supervisor; pharmacists and pharmacologists, psychologists and the head librarian of my hospital's medical library.

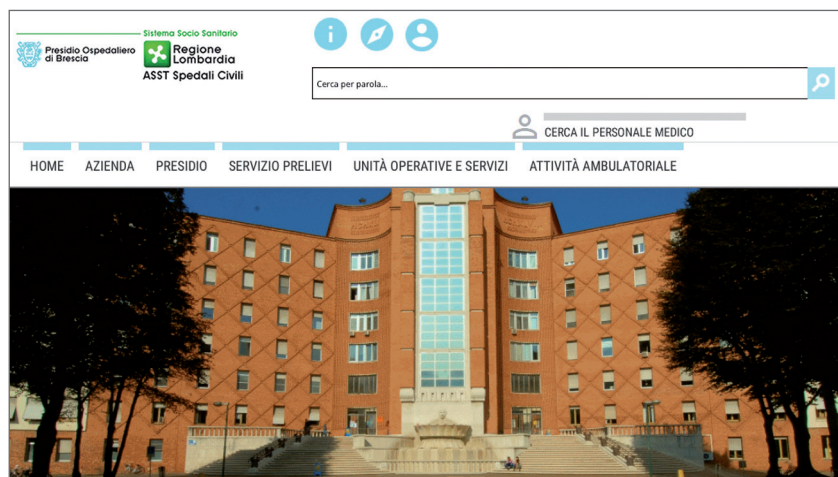
On 22nd May this year, we officially opened the Centre; an event that was attended by representatives of the public health institutions and for which the mistress of ceremonies was the honourable Paola Boldrini, the first signatory of the Bill of 12/2/16 on the diffusion of gender-specific medicine.

The next step will be to establish a non-profit organisation with a statute and management committee, so that we can register with the regional order of Associations and apply for research grants.

### What are the aims of the Centre?

The Centre intends to promote awareness, information, training and scientific diffusion initiatives on gender-specific medicine, as well as practical application projects regarding gender-specific health. The facility aims to become a reference point and hub of a network of professionals, researchers and scholars who wish to deal with gender differences from a social, environmental, economic and health-related point of view, with a global outlook on the topic of "gender diversity".

The Centre intends to become a place for sharing research, in which the worlds of medical science, economics and politics, education science and sociology, physical and life sciences and scholars, students and the general public can share their knowledge and come together to understand the complexity of the issues associated with gender diversity. The aim of our initiative is to be a facility within which to draw up guidelines and implement information and awareness programmes, in which research entwines with the issues that real life asks us to deal with regarding health, the environment, employment, the family, lifestyles, welfare



ASST Spedali Civili di Brescia has approximately 6500 employees, the vast majority of which are women.

and politics, in a fervent circuit of growth of common knowledge and dissemination activities, in order to reach the greatest possible number of citizens.

The promotion of health involves all the community's stakeholders and demands of them a new ability in their analysis of the relationships between society, the institutions, enterprise, research and training, according to a set of criteria and methods that bring together scientific, social and pedagogical and political and economic approaches. In this way, we hope to help improve each individual's ability to look after him/herself, to better understand the importance of being protagonists of his/her own health, by seeking opportunities to discover, compare and change his/her lifestyle; good prevention means sharing knowledge, information and data, in both scientific research and clinical practice,

thereby favouring the empowerment of patients and their families on a communication level.

With this in mind, we aim to create a positive interaction between science and communication and civil society, an urgent need in the topics in question.

#### Who is the Centre intended for?

The centre, which is open to the cooperation of all stakeholders, is open to the public three days a week; it has its own landline and mobile telephone numbers and an e-mail address ([medicinadigenere@fondazionecasaindustria.it](mailto:medicinadigenere@fondazionecasaindustria.it)). First and foremost, it addresses medical and health professionals, researchers and students, but it also aims to sensitise and inform all members of the community, both individually and through the associations.

In the future, the Centre intends to create partnerships and exchange

good practices with similar Monitoring Centres and other Centres present in Italy and the rest of Europe. It will also have its own website, with links to social media. We plan to produce communication material (both printed and online) such as brochures, videos, publications and articles and a Centre *bulletin*, in order to provide information on current and future initiatives.

#### What relationship does the Centre have with the local community?

In order to pursue its main aim of acting as a place for exchange, the diffusion of scientific information and the promotion of educational and training schemes regarding gender-specific health and gender differences that may consequently evolve into practical applications, we have drawn up a plan of action that involves the creation of the archive and training and educational events for the realisation of which the relationship with the local community is fundamental. With this in mind, we have formed a network with local institutions, public health institutions and private institutions that work with the NHS, with the Public and Catholic Universities, with the Association of Physicians and Associations of Nurses and Midwives, with women's associations (including the Associazione italiana donne medico [Italian Association of Women Doctors] and Soroptimist) and patient advocacy groups (including the GILS), with neighbourhood authorities and the local media. The training and educational events will provide young researchers and students with the opportunity to present their work on gender-specific medicine.

At the same time, we aspire to generate within the community a new vision of "health" that is social as well as clinical, by helping to identify more appropriate healthcare demands, which require integrated answers. To do so, with a community-oriented approach, we have established a network of relationships with the main local stakeholders, with which we can work in order to plan, organise and manage projects and initiatives in the best possible manner.

#### The regulations the Gender-Specific Health Archive and Information Centre complies with

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- ▶ Constitution of the Republic of Italy, articles 3 and 32. "Equality of citizens and the right to health".
- ▶ WHO right to health, 1948: International conference for the promotion of health as a state of physical, mental and social wellness
- ▶ 4th World Conference on Women (Beijing 1995): report on inequality in health.
- ▶ "The health of European women", European Community 1997; "2010 Women's Charter", European Commission 2010; "Europe 2020", European Union; "Women's Health" Project, 1998.
- ▶ WHO. Equity Act 2000: equality of access to healthcare and gender-oriented appropriateness.
- ▶ Italian Ministry of Health, 2007: establishment of the Women's Health Commission.
- ▶ Istituto Superiore di Sanità [National Institute of Health] – 2007/2008 Project: Gender-specific medicine as
- ▶ a strategic objective for public health: the appropriateness of healthcare for the protection of women's health.
- ▶ Legislative Decree 81/2008: "Occupational safety and health according to gender differences".
- ▶ Law-Decree Omnibus 2011 introduces the topic of gender-specific medicine.
- ▶ Between 2013 and 2016 a number of bills to favour the application and diffusion of gender-specific medicine were presented.
- ▶ 2012 State-Regional Authorities Agreement: promotion of the gender-specific approach to Health.
- ▶ Lombardy Regional Authority 2013: Regional Government Resolution X/1185 of 20/12/13: gender-specific medicine as a strategic objective for public health.
- ▶ Regional Government Resolutions X/1796 and 1845 of 5/2014: to improve gender-oriented clinical appropriateness.
- ▶ Regional Council Resolution no. X/783 of 5/8/15: "The gender-specific approach is a decisive element in the provision of medical care and in the development of health policy, aimed at medical and professional staff, as well as pharmacists and the general public".
- ▶ 2015 UN: of the 17 objectives, number V is to achieve health equality.

### How does the Centre interact with the Establishment and Local Health Authorities?

One of the first things the Centre did was establish a network with the city's establishment: Brescia's Municipal and Provincial Authorities, its hospitals, Fondazione Poliambulanza and the hospital facilities belonging to the San Donato group, in other words, with the local authorities, public health facilities and private institutions with NHS contracts, and with the Faculty of Medicine and its research centres.

We expect of the world of health and local authorities a greater ability to interpret the time we live in, our society and scientific potential and the desire to find a social agreement. Through the centre's work, we intend to improve the medical profession's capacity to reinvent itself with regard to the complexity of the patient, intended as both a being and a person, and the need to establish a relationship with the subject. In this context, the gender-specific approach plays a particularly innovative role. In this sense, what we expect of the project is the diffusion of the idea of gender-specific health as health characterised by differences, rather than by inequalities. As far as gender-specific health is concerned, it is of vital importance to create an interaction between research, application, training and the dissemination of knowledge. We have made contact with the National Institute of Health's Gender-Specific Medicine Centre and intend to establish partnerships with certain scientific societies.

### On a tangible level, what has the Centre achieved so far?

In the very few weeks since the Centre opened, we have continued to collect documentation, we have subscribed to journals and newsletters, we have maintained our relationships with our network partners and have established new partnerships and relationships. We have also set up and submitted a project for a call for grants organised by a local Foundation and undertaken the steps required to establish an Association. In the meantime, we are organising the programme of training and educational events that will open with meetings addressing, first and foremost, general practitioners and the general public on gender differences and specificities as regards HCV and HIV-related liver diseases and related conditions and on their chronic nature.

The researcher who works at the Centre and who is continuing her training in the gender-specific medicine field, has received her first users: two people asked for general information on the Centre, a student of medicine was looking for assistance with her degree thesis and another, who has already graduated, with her residency thesis and two others needed information for a project they are devising and that will be submitted with the hope of obtaining a grant. In the meantime, we are continuing our meetings with representatives of the neighbourhood authorities, in order to improve our visibility and receive suggestions and ideas.

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