Italian lessons: exploring general practice in Italy

The mere mention of Italy, for most people, conjures images of beautiful scenery, culinary delights, and magnificent architecture. Having thoroughly explored these particular avenues in the past, I was keen to delve into the Italian world of medicine to understand how my chosen profession works there. This was made possible thanks to funding obtained by the RCGP for 30 UK GP trainees to travel to Europe this year to spend 2 weeks observing a GP in their chosen country, with the main objective to broaden professional horizons and encourage interest in the healthcare systems of our European counterparts.

As a current ST3 trainee, for whom QOF and NICE have always existed, without a doubt the most striking difference I noted was the relative lack of financial restrictions in Italy with regards to the prescribing and ordering of investigations. Medications are almost always prescribed by brand name, first because there is little pressure to prescribe generically, and second because patients have a longstanding suspicion of generic medications which, I was told, has been propagated by the media. I wondered why there appears to be no such suspicion in the UK, but perhaps this is a battle that was waged on my behalf prior to my qualifying. It struck me as a shame that money was being spent on more expensive versions of the same medications, while physiotherapy was unavailable on the Italian NHS. Also of note was the significantly higher rate of investigations and specialist referrals. Again, this was due to a combination of fewer restrictions and greater patient expectations. Often patients would attend specifically to request a test or consultant opinion, rather than to discuss a particular symptom. MRI scans are particularly popular, and patients seem to value above all a specific diagnosis for a particular pain, rather than considering, as has become our way of thinking in the UK, how that investigation might change the outcome of that condition. Of course, during the 2 weeks I spent in Italy there was something different to note from every consultation; but my lingering thought was what a great shame it is that we have not spent more time learning from each other until now.

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