



Top Italian public health official faces allegation of failing to disclose pharma links

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The row over the conflicts of interests of one of Italy's most senior public health officials has reignited, with fresh claims that he failed to disclose earnings from drug companies.

The country's leading consumer rights group, Codacons, this week published what it said were all the relations between Walter Ricciardi, head of the National Institute of Health (Istituto Superiore di Sanita, ISS) and the drug industry.¹

The group said that Ricciardi should be investigated for activities including the receipt of €4000 (£3600; \$4500) for speaking to Pfizer staff in 2017, his involvement in a project sponsored by Pfizer and Janssen-Silage with the medicine faculty of Milan's Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, a €400 sponsorship payment from GlaxoSmithKline in November 2017, and his role as "scientific director" in an Abbvie project that involved a payment of €58 250 to the Milan university.

On 9 December the television consumer affairs programme *Le Iene* repeated the claims and added new ones, including the allegation that Ricciardi had failed to declare work for the pharmaceutical lobbying firm Altis, which took place after his appointment as head of the ISS.

In a statement to *The BMJ* he said, "In my long national and international career I have always declared scientific positions held in collaboration with pharmaceutical companies, in line with the national and international norms that have been requested."

He said he had been previously cleared by Anac (Italy's National Anti-Corruption Authority) of conflicts of interests and denied that the latest allegations against him would further undermine the Italian public's confidence in vaccination.

However, Codacons said this week, "Codacons is asking Anac to urgently rule on the possible incompatibility of Walter Ricciardi given his links with the vaccine manufacturers and the evidence filed by Codacons."

Public health policy over vaccination has been the source of controversy in Italy for several years.

In 2015 *The BMJ* reported how one Italian vaccine expert who criticised plans to expand Italy's national vaccination programme was threatened with legal action by government medical officers.²

Vittorio Demicheli, of the Cochrane Collaboration Vaccines Field, said then that plans to introduce vaccines against human papillomavirus for males, rotavirus for infants, and *Herpes zoster* and pneumococcal polysaccharide jabs for elderly people

were too costly or ill advised, and he questioned the motives behind the new programme, which was written by a panel that included Ricciardi.

The climate in Italy has been made more febrile by a populist government some of whose senior figures have called into question the value of vaccination. Matteo Salvini, the radical right wing interior minister and deputy prime minister, has called vaccines "useless and in many cases dangerous."

Francesco Longo, a health policy expert at Milan's Bocconi University, said that the controversy was, to a large degree, a result of political fighting and that vaccine sceptic groups would call on the populist government to remove Ricciardi from the ISS.

Last week the populist coalition plunged Italy's already confusing stance on vaccination into greater uncertainty by sacking 30 doctors and scientists from the ministry's public health advisory committee.³

This week a group of lawyers and doctors calling itself Vaccino Veritas published an open letter to the health minister on the alternative therapies site www.informasalus.it, which includes a section on animal homeopathy, calling for Ricciardi's dismissal.

Longo said, "There's a danger this controversy will further undermine public confidence at a time when this populist government has made ambiguous comments about vaccines.

"Of course, he [Ricciardi] should have declared all the payments. But in a sense the argument against Ricciardi is specious. There can't be many experts in his position who haven't received payments from drug companies.

"But the populist government will use this as an excuse to try to get rid of him. The real losers in this will be children who develop measles. And Ricciardi is right to say getting children vaccinated is a health priority."

The rate of measles, mumps, and rubella vaccine coverage in Italy fell from 90.5% in 2010 to 87.2% in 2016,⁴ although there is some evidence of a rise in uptake of 2.9% since then in some regions.⁵

Italy currently accounts for roughly a third of all measles cases reported by countries in the European Economic Area.

1 Day M. Italian expert questions need for expanded vaccination schedule. *BMJ* 2015;351:h6181. doi:10.1136/bmj.h6181

2 Codacons. Vaccini: dopo inchiesta delle Iene Codacons pubblica tutti i rapporti tra Ricciardi (ISS) e case farmaceutiche. Dec 2018. <https://codacons.it/vaccini-dopo-inchiesta-delle-iene-codacons-pubblica-tutti-i-rapporti-tra-ricciardi-iss-e-case-farmaceutiche>.

- 3 Dyer O. Italy's health minister fires country's top health board. *BMJ* 2018;363:k5158. 10.1136/bmj.k5158 30518546
- 4 Signorelli C, Odone A, Cella P, Iannazzo S, D'Ancona F, Guerra R. Infant immunization coverage in Italy (2000-2016). *Ann Ist Super Sanita* 2017;53:231-7.28956803

- 5 Signorelli C, Iannazzo S, Odone A. The imperative of vaccination put into practice. *Lancet Infect Dis* 2018;18:26-7. 10.1016/S1473-3099(17)30696-5 29303734

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