

# The birth and evolution of the Ministry of Health and of the National Health Service in Italy

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Current Ministries of Health (MH) have fundamental commitments in the body of modern States and exercise a number of functions that mainly regard the safeguard of human and animal health and medical-health planning and management. The many and various tasks of third millennium MH range from the surveillance of the safety of alimentary products, workplaces and the general environment to the organization of health professions and structures, from veterinary services to scientific research in the health context, from prevention of disorders to care and rehabilitation of diseases (1).

While in the western world the foundation of a number of Ministries of Health dates back to the second half of the nineteenth century, in that same period in Italy a Ministry of Health was not available, and the Home Office played a pivotal role in the protection of public health. In effect, the Royal Decree n. 2248 of March 20, 1865, established that the Home Office had the superintendentship of public health in the Italian Kingdom at the central level, while the same role was attributed, at the peripheral level and under the monitoring of the Home Office itself, to prefects and mayors.

In the twentieth century, in the thirties and forties, first Royal Decrees and later Government Decrees established health laws and hygiene and public health regulation organisms, in particular the High Commission for Hygiene and Public Health (Government Decree n. 417 of July 12, 1945). At the end of World War II, a national debate on health organization and coordination took place in Italy with reference to the tasks and functions of the new republican state, also because the

Italian Constitution (1948) clearly stated that the Italian Republic safeguarded human health as a fundamental right of individuals and of the whole community.

As a result, in 1958 law n. 296 of March 13 instituted the Italian Ministry of Health, whose central structure was composed by the Superior Council of Health, by the International Relationship Office, by the Study Centre and the Central Inspection Service and by seven Directorates. Although the newborn Ministry of Health did not include the mutualistic system, which was still largely subject to the control and vigilance of the Ministry of Labour and of social security, its activity in the fifties and in the sixties was of paramount importance. The Italian MH in fact elaborated a legal framework for the regulation of food and drugs and for the control of air pollution, and also fostered health information and prevention at the national level, promoting state health care with specific attention to social diseases. Moreover, at the end of the sixties a major reform of hospitals occurred in Italy, mainly thanks to the MH. The National Health Service was instituted by law n. 833 of December 23, 1978, which set up the Central Service of Health Planning and the Office for the Implementation of the National Health Service. Currently the Ministry of Health is in Italy the coordinating body of the national health scheme and the central organ of the National Health Service; the latter is now a complex of health activities and facilities carried out by national health institutions and regional health services (2). These functions derive from the 2011 amendment of Title V of the Italian Constitution (3), in particular item number 117, which introduced the concurrent

legislation action of the State and of the Regions as also the statutory authority of the Regions with regard to the protection of health, to the safety of work places, to the regulation of health professions, nutrition and scientific research. Still in 2001 the November 29 Decree issued by the Italian President of the Council of Ministries (4) defined the “essential standards of health care”, which are those guaranteed by the National Health Service, with regard to hospitals, National Health Service zones, work and life in general.

The past and present of national Health Services and Ministries of Health with their relative degrees of efficiency and standards of quality constitute through time reliable indications of the progressive sensibility towards health care and disease prevention of modern states.

### Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Professor Luisa Camaiora, B.A., M.Phil., for her correction of the English.

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Received: 8 April 2014

Accepted: 29 August 2014

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