

Italy's vaccine debate heats up as scandal, politics collide

May 3 2017, by Nicole Winfield

The vaccine debate in Italy heated up across multiple fronts Wednesday, as the country dealt with an outbreak of measles, an invigorated anti-vaccine campaign and a scandal involving a nurse who claimed for years to have inoculated children but didn't.

Italian health authorities announced Wednesday they would recall up to 7,000 children in northern Italy to be re-vaccinated after determining that some children didn't receive the necessary doses. A nurse, identified by authorities only as P.E., is accused of having botched thousands of inoculations from 2009-2015, intentionally or not.

At the same time, Italian politicians traded barbs over accusations that the populist 5-Star Movement had emboldened anti-vaccine campaigners at a time when Italy is dealing with a major outbreak of measles. Italy's health ministry has reported 1,739 cases since the start of the year, drawing the scorn of the EU and a travel warning from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control.

Years ago, when he was just a comic, 5-Star founder Beppe Grillo cast doubt about vaccines, mammograms and parents' obligations to vaccinate as part of a rant about pharmaceutical companies and the health industry. The 5-Stars today insist they're not anti-vaccination, but their official program "Vaccinate yes, vaccinate no, Let's have clarity" poses the question of whether to vaccinate. The program highlights side effects, says parents have lost faith in science, doctors, pharmaceutical companies and politicians, and calls for a reduction in the number of

obligatory inoculations.

The issue has returned to the forefront thanks to proposed legislation by the ruling Democratic Party that would re-introduce obligatory vaccines for children to be allowed into schools and daycare. The 5-Stars, the largest opposition bloc in parliament, have opposed the bill, arguing that parents should be allowed to choose.

The debate hit a high point last month when state-run RAI television aired an investigative report questioning the safety of the HPV vaccine, drawing swift scorn from the health ministry.

Ex-Premier Matteo Renzi, who has highlighted Grillo's vaccine stance, pounced Wednesday after a New York Times editorial accused the 5-Stars of fueling the anti-vaccine campaign much as President Donald Trump has in the U.S. Trump has promoted scientifically debunked theories linking vaccines with autism.

"For once in your life, Grillo, be human: let the clicks and algorithms go and take back your words that you said against vaccines," Renzi wrote on Facebook.

Grillo fired back on his blog: "There is no 5-Star Movement campaign against vaccines, nor an anti-vaccine platform, nor have there ever been repeated the false links between vaccines and autism."

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