



## Italian medical malpractice death figures questioned

Philip Pullella, Reuters

A row broke out in Italy yesterday over controversial figures estimating that some 90 people a day die in the country's hospitals due to bad medical practices.

Some newspapers described the figures as a "massacre", noting that the yearly number of about 33,000 estimated deaths was more than three times that in road accidents.

The numbers, given in a presentation on Monday at a convention of the Italian Association of Oncological Medicine (AIOM) - but contested by other groups - were given wide play in newspapers and television.

The estimates said most of the errors were made in operating theatres (32 per cent), followed by those in patient wards (28 per cent), emergency rooms (22 per cent) and out-patient clinics (18 per cent).

Some of the deaths could be attributed to inefficient organisation in hospitals, most of which are state-run and overcrowded.

"Whatever the correct numbers are... the data given by AIOM confirms the urgent need to face up to the issue of errors in medicine in order to guarantee maximum safety for citizens who turn to our country's health services every day," said Health Minister Livia Turco.

The most frequent errors involved decisions related to orthopaedics, tumours, obstetrics and surgery. Many involved administering the wrong type of medicine to patients, partly because they had similar generic or brand names.

The numbers were contested by several medical groups. Amedeo Bianco, president of Italy's doctors' association, said they had to be taken with a pinch of salt.

But he said that while such estimates were prone to "wide margins of error," they did send "a worrying message" that needed to be looked at in more detail.

They were also contested by Maurizio Maggiorotti, head of the Association of Doctors Unjustly Accused of Malpractice.

"This is not only false but it has no scientific foundation or statistical credence," he said in a statement.

"Surely human errors exist and should be prevented and stemmed," said Maggiorotti. He denounced headlines in national newspapers about the report as "sensationalist".

Still, the numbers were worrying enough to prompt parliamentarian Riccardo Villari, a member of the centre-left Daisy party in Prime Minister Romano Prodi's coalition, to call on the health minister to address parliament on the findings.