Medical Computer Applications in Italy

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INTRODUCTION

After having been in operation for some 30 years through its National Institutes for Health Insurance, the health care delivery system in Italy has been in a serious crisis for several years. Therefore, following a very recent law (June 1977), it has initiated a process of reform by setting up a National Health Service (NHS) on the British model which will absorb and amplify the various activities of the National Institutes in accordance with the new operative programs.

Extendable to the whole population, this new system will become fully operational on a regional basis following a second law, which is expected to be passed in the near future. The Italian government is counting on this to overcome, or at least to control, the present crisis of the system, in both its structural and managerial aspects. It is a crisis that knows no national frontiers, insofar as it is being combated in all its multiple causes by various governments, who are invariably at grips with the cost explosion and the consequent degradation of the quality of the health services.

With the aim of reducing administrative costs, the NHS will undoubtedly have to have the power to proceed with an effective revision of the criteria adopted in directing and controlling the system itself, particularly since it operates on a no-charge basis. It therefore calls for innovations of a technological character; first of all the use of the computer. Following the first positive experiments carried out in Italy, the computer has finally been adopted for use in the field of health care delivery systems, where it has demonstrated its capacity to augment the productivity, the efficiency, and the availability of the service.

Before describing the actual situation obtaining in Italy from this point of view, I believe it would not be without interest to refer to the reasons for this delay, in order to better evaluate the possibility of integrating the computer more fully into the health services. Above all, it is important to emphasize that the delay in the adoption of the computer has been unduly protracted in spite of the fact that we find ourselves in a...
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