



# The Leader of Lega Nord Matteo Salvini Positively Meets Ideas From an Italian Homeopath to Fight on Mandatory Vaccination

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## Abstract

When dealing with public information that comes from the world wide web and other social media, people might be deceived by fakes, which such individuals may be disposed to trust as sound and fundamental truths. Fakes can often create opinions, which can be used to arrange a debate, but fakes do never deal with science. A fake is not necessarily a lie but it can be a truth modified to capture people's interest through a mendacious and conflictual attitude. Clinical infectious science, as well as vaccine immunology and epidemiology, may be damaged by these unsound, unreliable and unverified controversies. Starting from January 2018, in a time course very close to the very recent political elections occurred in Italy, a huge deal of fakes and queer news inflated any social network in order to create a polarized opinion against vaccination, involving also many official press releases about vaccines and epidemiology of infectious diseases, generating news that moved the commonest popular opinion towards a defined political address and orientation.

**Keywords:** Vaccination, Italy, Debate, Homeopathy, Salvini

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## Background

Someone would like to believe that the still ongoing debate on vaccine hesitancy and mandatory vaccination in Italy should come to an end just following the date March 4, 2018, once political elections in Italy went to an end. During this time, politics polarized people's interest towards a great medical concern, ie, mandatory vaccination, which many of them allowed to burst as an outcry against the Government decisions. Criticisms against vaccinations in general did not fade out so far, though these days are much more crowded by the debate about the Government making People are becoming oriented to trust the opinion, forwarded by many homeopaths, that vaccinations are ultimately unsafe.

Italy is certainly an astonishing place, where arts, science, philosophy and culture are easily discussed as a major topic of conversation, sometimes with the same nimbleness of talking about sports and the same strength of talking about metaphysics. Yet, this attitude, which makes Italians particularly fascinating and appealing worldwide, may also enable anyone, even without expertise, to discuss of everything and to let be nourished by scientific truths as well as fakes, quite indifferently, if fakes are particularly coaxing. We must admit that this attitude is particularly widespread in the world and not necessarily regards the single Italians. Yet, Italians, likewise Americans, love to expand an important debate occurring in the social and political scenery. However,

what we would like to mean, sincerely, is that any freelance opinion may be easily treated as a sound and reliable truth, often without a clear and outstanding verification, wherever you are meeting a democratic debate, from social networks to the official press. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Italian official press has been recently captured by an endorsement on Twitter from Matteo Salvini to Paolo Bellavite, of whom the former is a renowned Italian politician, the latter a renowned expert of homeopathy, currently working in Ngozi (Burundi) and who recently wrote a book, which attracted the attention of the political Leader of Lega Nord and which is full of criticism against mandatory vaccination, interestingly while the author is working in Africa, notoriously known to be inflated by a huge deal of endemic infections and a great concern regarding the extreme difficulty in leading and arranging the local vaccination policy.<sup>1</sup> When interviewed, Bellavite showed a strong reluctance to the headline "homeopath," despite he studied homeopathy for more than twenty years, as, he said, this "expertise" should ask for a much greater bulk of years and investigation, respect to the simple career of an academic professor. We are prompted to be in agreement with this assessment, concerning homeopathy as the result of a hard work. Yet, we are asking how he is seriously endowed to discuss about vaccines and epidemiology of vaccination without having never published anything on the issue in the scientific community. We wondered if in Italy is particularly

used to discuss about astrophysics if you are a housewife. Despite Bellavite and his endorsement from Salvini, the majority of Italian parents, ie, 83.7%, are categorized as “pro-vaccine” towards their children, 15.6% “vaccine-hesitant” and only 0.7% clearly anti-vaccine, while the hesitation leading to refuse (39.1%) or interrupt vaccination and its recalls (42.4%), is closely related to safety concerns.<sup>2</sup> People believing in short-term (85.7%) and in long-term (05.2%) vaccine adverse reactions usually through the “anti-vax” crowd.<sup>2</sup> Similar percentages of hesitant and vaccine reluctant people, ie, around 15%, can be found among people trusting the existence of a huge deal of adverse effects with medical (pharmacology) rather than herbal treatments and usually appeal to homeopathy, ie, 13.6%.<sup>3</sup> This evidence should support a recent survey conducted in Freemantle and Adelaide (Australia) by retrieving data from the collation of two research studies, where the authors found an association between people trusting vaccine hesitancy or vaccine rejection with people frequently using complementary and alternative medicine (CAM).<sup>4</sup> Homeopathy and vaccine hesitancy (or reluctance) appear to arise from a similar source, which is the general reluctance in trusting official medicine and science. In this perspective, at least in a democratic country, a homeopath should not be conceptually pursued if having a speech on vaccine safety and if warning people about any hazard related to vaccines, in order to envisage dangers and inform people of any vaccine-dependent damage, because this homeopath is talking to people’s feeling, with their burden of fears and concerns, not properly to people’s rationality and awareness. And probably this is also a good reason to explain the awkward occurrence of the politico’s endorsement towards a homeopath, i.e. to set on fire people outcry. In this context, misinformation is frequently just behind the corner.

### People Uptaking Fakes as Reliable Science?

A very recent correspondence from Roberto Burioni et al in *Nature*, reported that in Veneto (Italy) the suspension of formerly mandated vaccinations, by investing on alternatives politics in health education in order to promote a voluntary vaccine admission, led, for example, only to a decline in the coverage for the polio vaccine throughout ten years, from 2006 to 2016, ie, by only 5.2% in Veneto compared with the 3.3% nationwide.<sup>5</sup> However, despite the so-called medical education of people living in the Region in being aware of healthcares and available pharmacology, Veneto usually accounts on non-revised news on the world wide web, rather than from academic experts. Some authors, just living and working in Veneto (Italy), reported that diphtheria vaccine is completely useless, as epidemics could be completely dampened by the simple use of antibiotics and by washing teeth.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the epidemiological plot of diphtheria cases in the United States (see CDC diphtheria at the link <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/pubs/pinkbook/dip.html>), shows clearly that diphtheria cases dropped down after 1960, when mandatory vaccines were introduced, never before, when interestingly antibiotics (1928-1940) and Colgate’s teeth past (1873) were already known.

Furthermore, a recent article on *BMJ* by Paterlini,<sup>6</sup> highlighted the embarrassing case of the meeting organized by the Italian National Order of Biologists held in Rome on March 2, 2018, to celebrate Fifty Years since the Order Foundation, with the purpose to discuss about “New Frontiers of Biology” and inviting as speakers in the Congress renowned experts yet engaged in puzzling topics, such as Prof Luc Montagnier for the memory of water and other lecturers clearly critical with vaccination.<sup>6</sup> Most probably, when this Letter will be published, the Congress will have reach a conclusion and the debate expanded. We do not know if the “anti-vax” movement is intrinsically linked to homeopathy and the memory of water but in the public debate we usually meet these two topics as undoubtedly associated.

The apparently good attempt from the President of the National Order of Biologists in Italy to allure the public opinion with hot topics in biology, such as physics of high diluted water, electromagnetic fields, nanoparticles in vaccines, vaccine-borne diseases and so on, might even be a failure from the beginnings, because a great deal of the purported “scientific” evidence collected in the Congress to support these “new trends” in current biology is anything but science. For example, the “research” paper by Dr. A. M. Gatti on micro- and nanocontamination in vaccines, which according to the authors may cause vaccine-borne diseases, has been published on a “predatory journal,” without undergoing any peer reviewing process before being published.<sup>7</sup> The 2008 Nobel Laureate for Medicine, Prof. Luc Montagnier, who clearly endorsed the Benveniste’s “memory of water” during an interview published on *Science*, failed in assessing and reproducing his results, which yet reported in very low impacted or non-indexed journals, never in *Science* or *Nature* if dealing with extraordinary new scientific discoveries.<sup>8-10</sup> Interestingly, one of the excellent promoters of the Congress is a professor from the Department of Biology of the University of Padua, ie, in Veneto (Italy). Again, Veneto has been recently a leading Italian Region against mandatory vaccination, the Governor is a member of the political party Lega Nord and Matteo Salvini, as indicated above, recently endorsed on Twitter the author of a book, highly critical with mandatory vaccines, who studied the memory of water for more than twenty years together with the physician Riccardo Ortolani, who is notoriously against any kind of vaccination and maybe of also pharmacological therapy for children.<sup>1,11</sup> Is there a hidden connection?

In the days very close to the political elections, many “strange” news occurred in the social networks and the widespread popular press, news that elicited the suspicion of a driving machinery towards a defined political address and orientation. The Salvini’s endorsed homeopath, now engaged in a furious struggle against vaccination, posted a link on Twitter where he claimed that people undergoing flu vaccination is much more infectious than non-vaccinated individuals, so addressing the provocative (and perhaps insane) opinion that influenza vaccines cause flu.<sup>12</sup> Actually, the article by Yan et al, states simply that people’s breaths undergoing flu vaccination showed a content of aerosol 6.3 times higher than non-vaccinated individuals (only for avian influenza A,  $P < .03$ )

but RNA viral load in nasopharyngeal swabs was negative for both influenza A and B viruses.<sup>13</sup>

### Why Uploading and Wide-Spreading False News or Fakes?

The awkward opinion that vaccines cause infections was held by the endorsed homeopath also during an interview by David Gramiccioli, about polio virus in Africa, where he is currently working. The scientist also counselled their readers via a public blog to read an article about complottism in flu vaccination, obviously (again) published in a predatory journal.<sup>14</sup>

### Conclusions

As stated above, fakes create opinions but do not deal with science.

The opinion of the Editor in Chief of the leading scientific journal *Nature* on mandatory vaccination appeared on January 17th of this year reported in summary that politics should not be the only way to boost a vaccination campaign, yet much more important the scientific community of experts must help common people to be fully aware of the usefulness and efficacy of vaccination, promoting a fair and civil process of correct educational information among physicians and users.<sup>15</sup> The debate is in its utmost activity, and so far its main purpose is to polarize people's to alternative positions against the scientific "establishment," which is quite always depicted as a poorly honest and conflicts-bearing reality. Actually, as Paterlini recently wrote,<sup>6</sup> we would like to report her cited sentence from the press officer at Asset, Dr. Roberta Villa, who said: "the problem is not just about vaccines. Italy has been facing a contrarian culture from some doctors and scientists for some time. *New Frontiers of Biology* is only one example..."

Instead of promoting the best current science and its throughput technology, the National Order of Biologists in Italy, on the contrary, invited speakers who are eliciting serious doubts on vaccine safety and evidence-based medicine (EBM), as in the meanwhile is "winking" to homeopathy and pseudoscience.<sup>6</sup> We do not know if a political conflict of interest might be hidden behind this disputable initiative. Probably, it is time to sign altogether an Open Letter against the President of the Italian National Order of Biology, who can no more represent the whole Board of Professionals working in research institutes and Academies, standing this awkward presentation of Italian Biologists to the scientific community worldwide.<sup>6</sup>

Science is a highly serious matter and to date still many people die for bad medical education. And moreover clinical infectious science may be damaged by these non-sound, non-verified controversies.

### Ethical issues

Not applicable.

### Competing interests

Authors declare that they have no competing interests.

### Authors' contributions

Both authors conceived and wrote the paper, SC revised the paper, GB assessed the citation refs, SC submitted the paper.

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