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On the home front, direct aid

By Elisabetta Povledo

The first Saturday in February, thousands of volunteers descended upon pharmacies throughout Italy. They waited patiently for stuffed-up or feverish customers to stagger in and then asked them to make a donation of an over-the-counter drug towards a good cause: a drug bank that would redistribute the medicines to the needy.

More than 50 percent of pharmacy clients responded, ringing up 106,000 medicines worth around a half a million euros, from anti-inflammatory drugs to laxatives to fever reducers.

"Sometimes the simplest ailments become emergencies if they aren't treated," said Margherita Improta, the coordinator of the initiative, which works out of the offices of the Lombard branch of Federfarma, the pharmacists' association and the project's main sponsor.

Italy's nationalized health system, which covers the costs of 70 percent of pharmaceuticals, doesn't extend to most over-the-counter medications. "But when we spoke with nonprofit organizations that work with indigent, or, homeless people, they told us these were the drugs they

most needed," said Marcello Perigo, a pharmacist in Vimercate, near Milan, and the director of the drug bank.

Throughout the year, organizations like Caritas and or Medici nel Mondo (Doctors in the World), just two of some 300 charities that benefit from the initiative, draw up a list of medications they most need. During the annual drug drive, now in its third year, pharmacy clients were told which medicines would be most useful.

"It's very much directed to local needs," said Improta adding that the spirit of the project was to keep administrative and distribution costs at a minimum. "You get the sense of helping your neighbor."

The drug bank is an offshoot of an extant food bank run by the Company of Works, the non-profit organization affiliated with the Communione and Liberazione conservative Catholic movement. The project started in Lombardy with the support of local Federfarma officials and may be the only initiative of this kind in the world.

Maurice Weaver, of America's

Second Harvest, a food bank network in the United States, said the Italian project was the first of its kind he'd ever heard of. In the U.S., some clinics provide pharmacy items to food banks, but there is nothing like the drug bank.

The first year, some 250 pharmacies in and around Milan took part. This past year, more than 1,000 par-

ticipated throughout Italy. ANIFA, the association of over-the-counter drug manufacturers, also makes conspicuous donations which try to fill in gaps where needs weren't covered by the drug drive. Improta said that drug companies were becoming increasingly involved in the initiative.

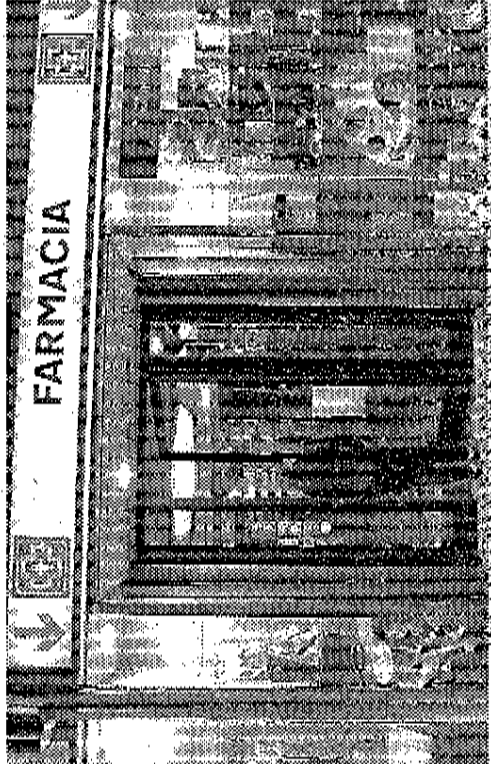
Still, Paolo Gradnik, the president

of Federfarma Lombardy, thought that the direct involvement of pharmacists and doctors was key to the success of the initiative. To avert any possible liability issues, pharmacists and doctors work with the charities to ensure that each patient is under medical supervision before receiving medication. "You preserve the filler of the health system which affords a guarantee," he said.

That was one reason, in fact, why the drug bank was conceived to work on a local level and not in developing countries, where Doctors Without Borders and Pharmacists Without Borders are already active. "We want this to be a gesture of solidarity with the same standards of quality as those received by patients who pay," Gradnik explained. "Just because something is free, it shouldn't be of a lesser quality."

Gradnik said that the first Saturday of February was designated for the drive because there are more people in pharmacies stocking up on remedies. People tended to be more sympathetic too. "You've got the same cough and the same cold as a homeless person who can't afford to buy medicine," he said.

That, too, is why you can't



The pharmacy at the home front, in Milan, is part of a national initiative.