Innovation in orphan drugs: the regulatory path in Italy.

P. Popoli, National Center for Drug Research and Evaluation Istituto Superiore di Sanità, Roma

The marketing authorization of orphan drugs (drugs designed for the diagnosis, the prophylaxis or the treatment of a life threatening and/or debilitating rare disease) is a responsibility of the European Medicines Agency (EMA). The Committee for Orphan Medicinal Products (COMP), in particular, has the task to establish whether a drug can be designated as an orphan and, thus, have access to several advantages, such as protocol assistance and fee reduction. In the last years, thanks to the important incentives offered for the development of orphan drugs, the number of applications of these drugs was significantly increased.

Being the authorization procedure centralized at the EMA, the regulatory role played at the national level (Agenzia Italiana del Farmaco, AIFA) only concerns drug reimbursement, prescription and distribution modalities (for instance, inclusion in one of the AIFA registries). These are very difficult tasks, since the evaluation of the actual place in therapy of an orphan drug is complicated by the limited level of evidence available at the time of marketing authorization. Indeed, in the development of drugs for rare diseases, the small samples available for trials lead to much less robust approaches, such as the use of historical controls and/or of surrogate end points.

In Italy, the policy concerning drugs for rare diseases is generally very inclusive, and under certain circumstances the National Health Service grants the access to a drug even before its marketing authorization. Such “special” access programs, which are limited to patients affected by a serious disease and without any therapeutic alternative, can be granted for drugs marketed in other Countries or already tested at least in Phase II clinical trials.