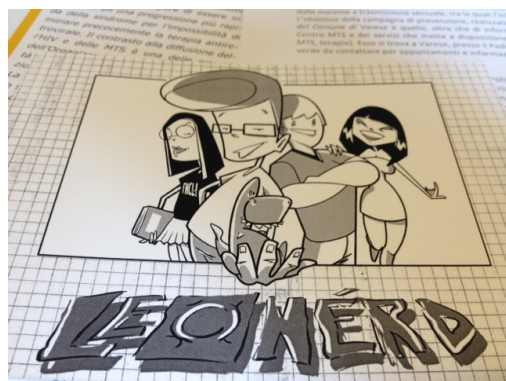


Fighting AIDS, also with comics

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AIDS and HIV are two abbreviations that everybody has learned to fear, but they are regarded as not being relevant to Italy today, as if they were phenomena that affect developing countries, or past years of drugs and syringes. But this is not the case.

It is true that the emergency of the past decades is over, but **the data of Varese's local health authority show that the phenomena still exists. About forty new cases of HIV infection** are recorded annually in Varese Province, and there are currently **2323 HIV-positive people, who are being monitored by the health authorities**. Their average age is 42 years, but there have also been cases of **young people, under the age of 20**. Local health authority estimates also include a few hundred people who may be affected by the virus, but do not know yet.

These figures are scary, but fear is not the right weapon to prevent the phenomenon; **knowledge is**.

This is what is explained by the local health authority, who have presented a new information campaign, which has been created in collaboration with the online forum Informagiovani, and the department of Youth Policies of Varese Town Council, to inform young people about the risks of AIDS, and to publicise the existence of the STD Centre and of the services it provides (e.g. interviews, specialist medical examinations, blood tests for STD diagnosis and therapies).

The information campaign **also uses a cartoon called Leonérd**, which will be distributed in the main pubs and clubs frequented by young people in the province.

The project was launched in 2012, an initiative by the local health authority in Varese, in particular, by the Department of Medical Prevention (**STD Centre** – Prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, in Varese, in the Biffi Building, in Via O. Rossi 9, on the first floor. The free phone number for appointments and information is: 800-012080, Monday to Friday, from 9 am to 12 am).

With the Leonérd project, a comic has been produced, about Leonérd, a young hypochondriac

and *nerd*, who is obsessed with viruses and bacteria; its task is to bring to the attention of young people, in an enthralling and targeted way, the false myths about the HIV virus, and provide correct information in the last picture of each episode.

All of the episodes published so far can be seen on the blog iosonoleonerdd.wordpress.com, on Twitter (@IoSonoLeonerd), and on Facebook (www.facebook.com/iosonoleonerdd).

The project has been publicised in the high schools of Varese, with the distribution of promotional material and the production of video interviews (which can be seen on the Youtube channel *Informagiovani Varese*, at the link <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3eV0EF6J-JI&feature=youtu.be>), where the students are asked who they think Leonérd is. Those who came close to the correct answer received a free gadget and a postcard with the details of the website, Facebook and Twitter, where they can read the comic.

Distribution of placemats

The new part of the project was presented this morning, at a press conference, in the presence of the Councillor for the Family and the Person, Enrico Angelini, of the manager of Informagiovani, Elena Emilriti, with Dr Franca Sambo, who is in charge of Prevention and Health Promotion, of the Department of Medical Prevention, Health Department, Varese local health authority, and a representative of the Schools Office.

The new part of the project, which will be advertised throughout the province, is intended for a different target than the student population (in particular, young people, from the ages of 19 to 35 years). Ten thousand placemats, for use on dinner tables, have been made, with the first 12 episodes of Leonérd, and will be distributed to 5 pubs/clubs in Varese Province that have proven to be sensitive to the theme of HIV prevention, and to be interested in using the placemats on their premises.

The draw took place during the press conference: **the first 10,000 placemats are going to be distributed**, 2000 to each pub/club; they are the *Circolo Quarto Stato*, in Cardano al Campo, the club *The Family*, in Albizzate, the *Folk Pub*, in Tradate, *Pub Buenavista*, in Origgio, and the *Ghost Café*, in Luvinata. New placemats will be printed in October, and all of the pubs and clubs taking part in the campaign will receive them with the new episodes of the comic strip.

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