

COMMENT | 18 August 2021

Italians turn to family doctors for information on COVID-19 vaccines

Survey shows key role of GPs in shaping attitudes towards vaccination, with social media playing a minor part.

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Rome, ITALY - 24 February 2021: First day of mass vaccination for teachers. Credit: Sara De Marco / Alamy Stock Photo.

Discussions about vaccination against COVID-19, and about how to increase vaccination rates, are dominating headlines in several countries, with significant attention devoted by the news media to so-called anti-vaccination positions. New data about attitudes towards vaccination against COVID-19 in Italy collected through the Science in Society Monitor* reveal interesting trends.

First of all, willingness to be vaccinated has significantly and steadily increased in the Italian population since vaccines were first announced in late 2020. According to the most recent data, 85% of Italians have either been vaccinated already, or plan to be soon (fig.1).

Hard 'anti-vax' positions (those who have no intention of being vaccinated because of an ideological opposition) actually represent a small minority (2%), although quite vocal and visible.

Have you been vaccinated?%

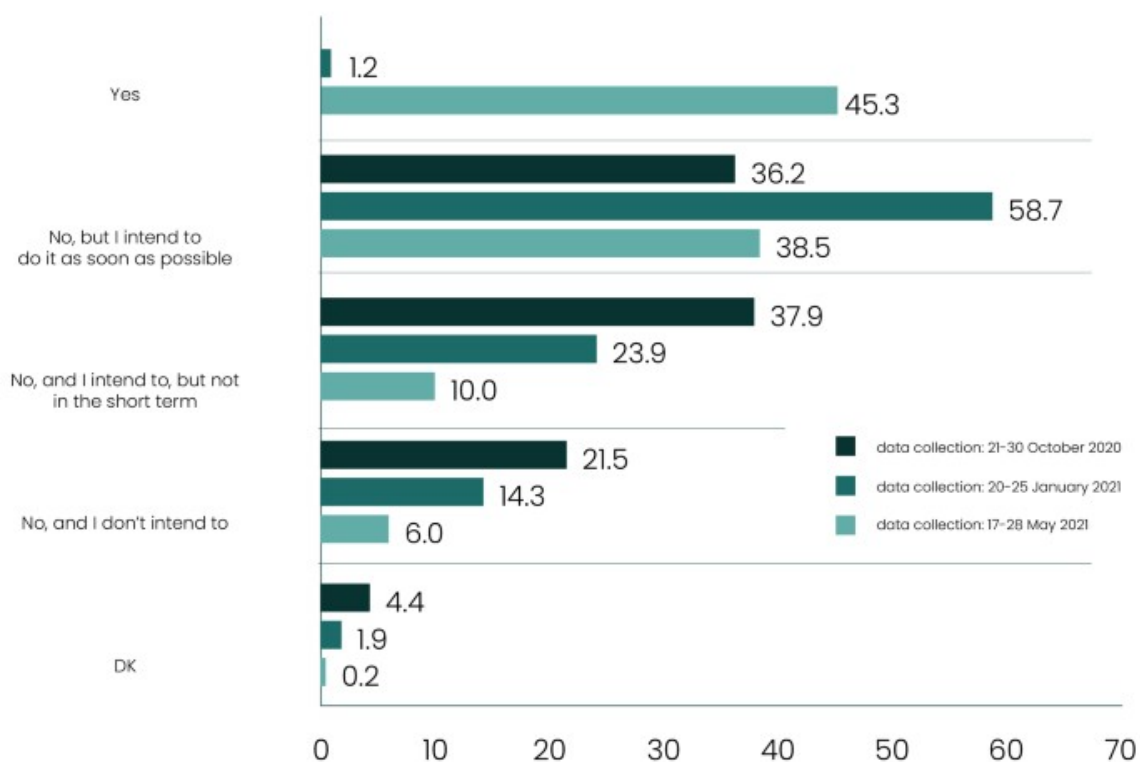


Figure 1. Source: Observa Science in Society Monitor, 2021.

On the other hand, citizens who hesitate to be vaccinated mostly mention possible side effects with regard to their health. These concerns should be addressed clearly and openly by institutions and agencies, rather than be disregarded as irrational prejudice. Confusion and uncertainty in communicating decisions about the AstraZeneca vaccine has certainly not helped in this respect.

Despite widespread stereotypes, social media play a very modest role in information about vaccines and the pandemic situation. Only 6% of interviewees mention social media contacts and web forums as their key information source, and only 4% consider such contacts and forum the main trustworthy information source (figures 2, 3). In addition, many of those who have heard about vaccination safety issues in social media have later sought clarification on this matter from their own medical doctor (GP).

Where are you mainly looking for information?(%)

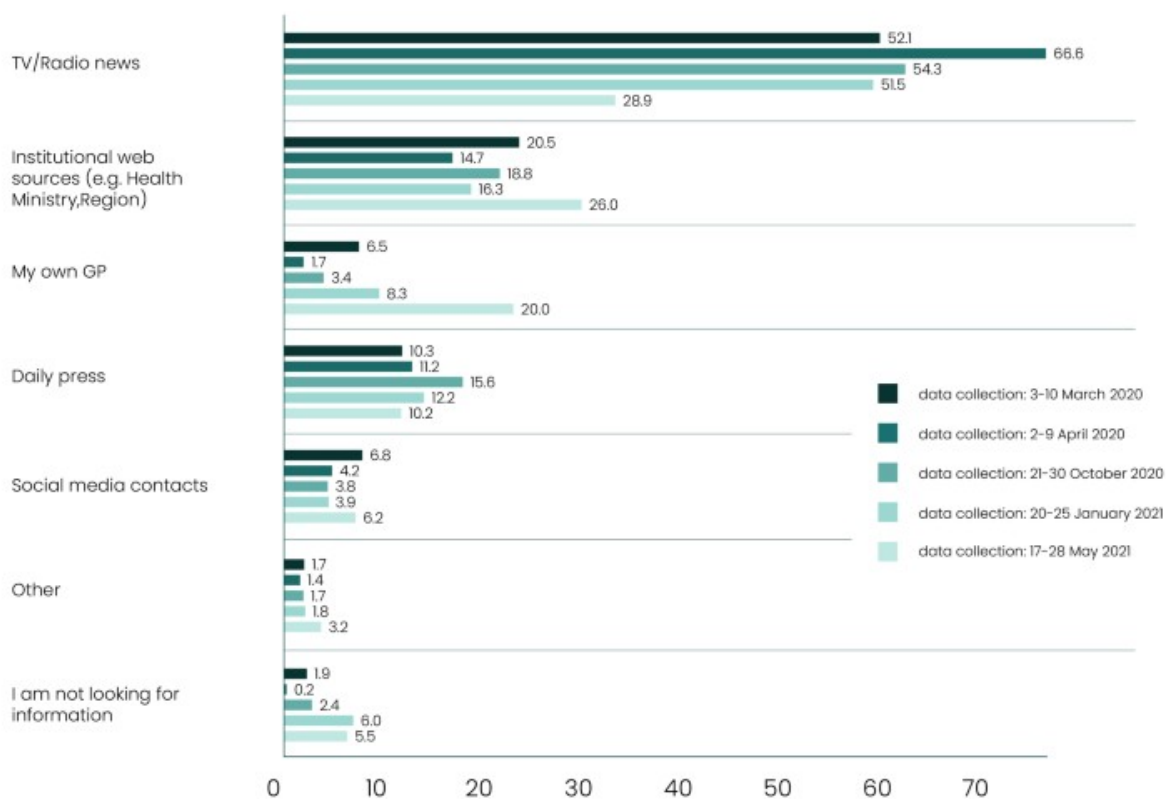


Figure 2. Source: Observa Science in Society Monitor, 2021.

In general, the role of GPs as key information sources about the pandemic has

significantly increased during the last year, with one citizen over five now considering their GP as their main reference.

At the same time, more than one-third continue to principally rely on indications from institutional sources (Ministry of Health, Regional Health Departments), a trend which has been observed since the early stages of the pandemic.

Which of these sources do you trust the most?(%)

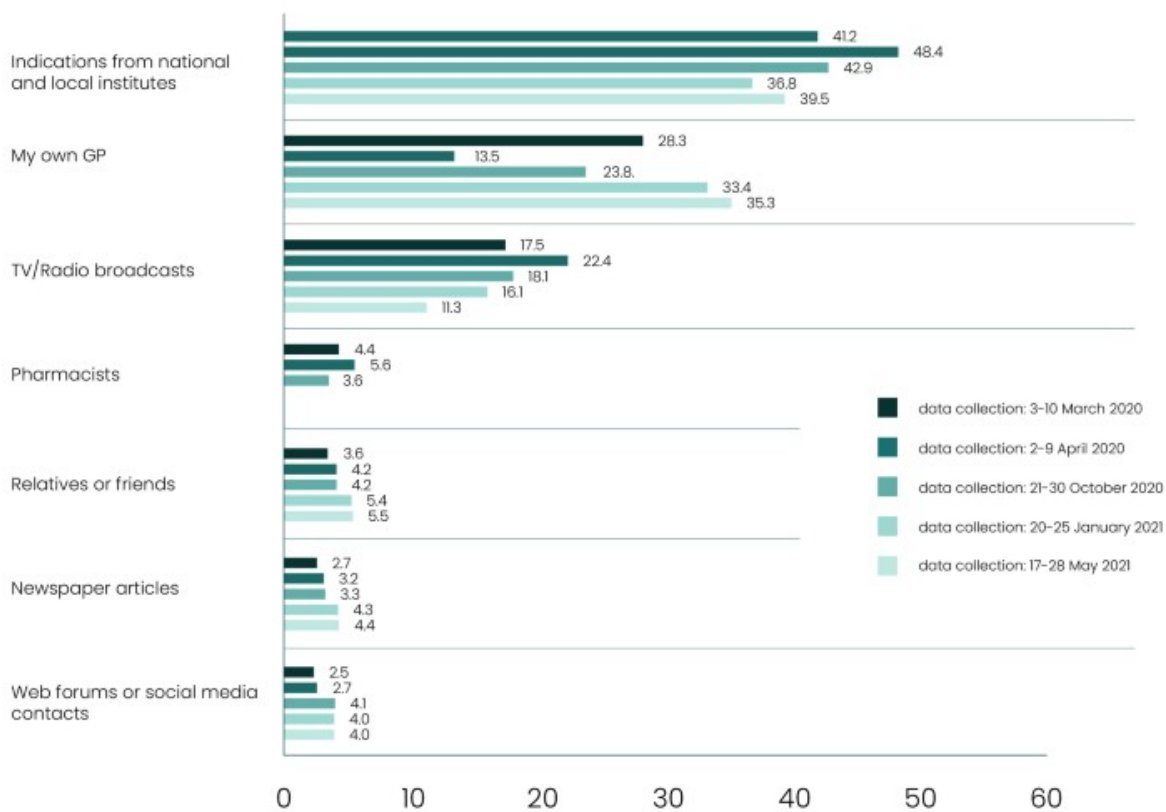


Figure 3. Source: Observa Science in Society Monitor, 2021.

The communication role of experts is less appreciated. 71% of Italians think there has been excessive exposure of scientific experts in the media; another two-thirds regret that experts were often led to speak on topics they were not necessarily competent about (e.g. virologists commenting on educational policies or impacts of lockdown on mental health) (fig.4). This factor should not be underestimated in terms of communication impact, considering also that TV (where thousands of heated discussions among experts were featured) is mentioned by respondents as the main source of news questioning the safety of

Covid-19 vaccines.

Please consider the scientific experts who have intervened publicly (eg on Tv or social media) and indicate the statement that you most agree with (%)

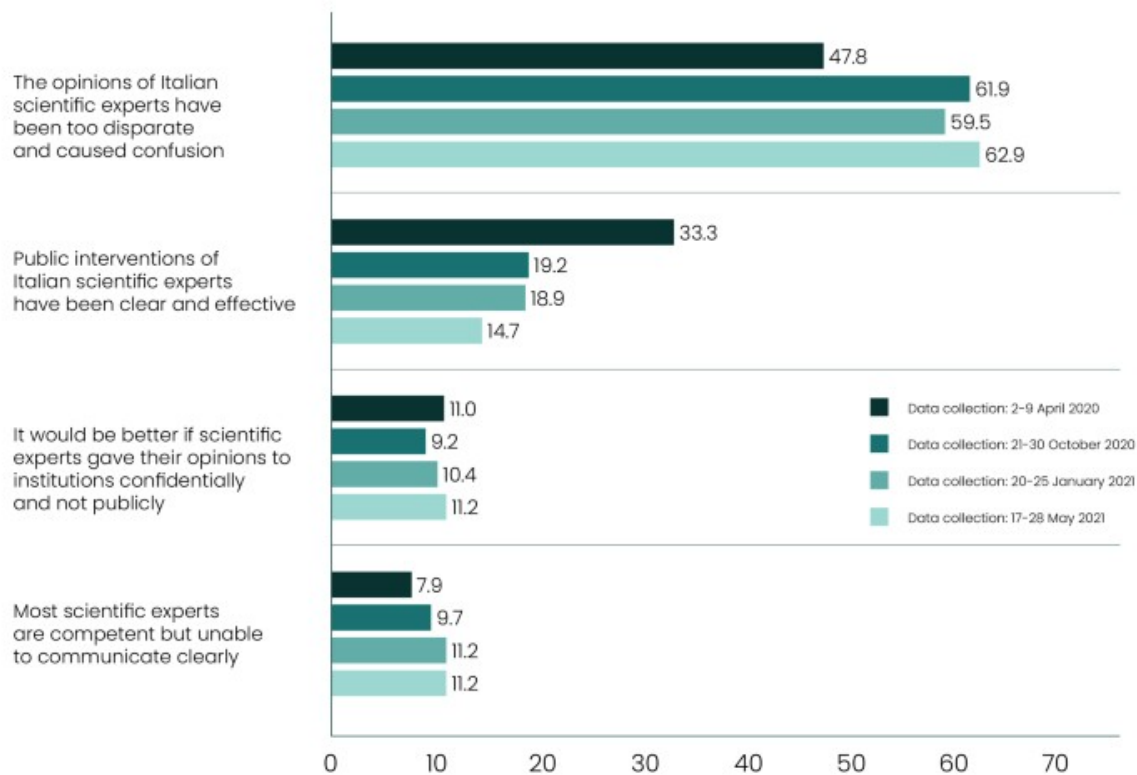


Figure 4. Source: Observa Science in Society Monitor, 2021.

Overall, our data point to increasing responsibility and relevance of communication by institutions and medical doctors (GP). Institutional communication should expand and focus efforts to address the relevant concerns of hesitant citizens with regard to possible side effects of vaccination, rather than engaging with opposition by anti-vax minorities. In this light, GPs could play an increasingly relevant role that could be further sustained by appropriate institutional communication.

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***Methodological note**

The Observa Science in Society Monitor has monitored opinions and attitudes toward science and technology in Italy since 2003. The survey described in the article was conducted on a national sample, proportional and representative by gender, age and area of residence of Italian populations aged over 15 years. The first survey was conducted between 3 and 10 March 2020 interviewing 1002 subjects; total cases became 979 after weighting in order to make the sample structure identical to the Italian population with regard to the variables gender, age and study level. The second survey was conducted between 2 and 9 April 2020 interviewing 1048 subjects (1029 after weighting). The third survey was conducted between 21 and 30 October 2020 interviewing 1001 subjects (991 after weighting). The fourth survey was conducted between 20 and 25 January 2021 interviewing 1007 subjects (987 after weighting). The fifth survey was conducted between 17 and 28 May 2021 interviewing 1003 subjects (977 after weighting). In all five surveys, data were collected using the CATI technique for 30% of the sample and the CAWI technique for the remaining 70%.

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