

The VACS Opinion Study: Vaccine Attitudes and COVID-19 Safety

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Dear Editor,

The outbreak of the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 causing Coronavirus-19 Disease (COVID-19) in Ireland posed many challenges for patients, health-care services, and hospitals across the board. Amongst the most vulnerable demographics, the senior population of Ireland were urged to maintain social distancing, and cocoon, ultimately disrupting normal life^{1,2}.

The Irish Medical Organisation in conjunction with local GP practices coordinated centralised vaccination clinics in Merlin Hospital to facilitate efficient transport, storage, and administration of the Pfizer vaccines primarily for members of the greater Galway region aged 65 years and above.

During their obligatory 15-minute observation period, we conducted a cross-sectional survey consisting of demographic and opinion style questions using five-point and three-point Likert scales. Topics included their vaccine experience, perceived safety in various settings, pressures to take the vaccine, and lifestyle changes during the pandemic. Among the 533 respondents, there were 46 respondents (8.6%) who were 65 years of age or less; 23 respondents (4.3%) between the ages of 65-69; 202 respondents (37.9%) between the ages of 70-74; 156 respondents (29.3%) between the ages of 75-79; 101 respondents (18.9%) ages 80-84, and five individuals (0.01%) above the age of 85. We hope to share a few of our notable findings in this letter.

The general sentiment among respondents (94.9%) was an increased sense of safety after receiving the vaccine. Fifty-three respondents (9.9%) admitted to feeling some form of familial pressure. This could be related to one's perception of safety as 428 (80.3%) respondents felt safer visiting family members after having received their vaccinations.

Notably, many respondents, 57.4% (n=306), denied feeling less likely to visit their GP since the start of the pandemic despite transmission-risk uncertainty. Fifty-four respondents (10.7%) were neutral. One-hundred seventy respondents (31.9%) reported being less likely to visit their GP during the pandemic. However, among those 170 respondents, 147 of them (86.5%) reported being *more* likely to visit their GP after having received the vaccine. This greatly validates the efforts of the Galway GPs in implementing appropriate safety measures (PPE, social distancing, scheduling changes) and adjusting to novel challenges and restrictions posed throughout the pandemic³. These statistics are also a testament to a deep, pre-existing trust formed between the GP and patient. Removing potential barriers to allow accessible safe medical care is crucial, thus timely delivery of the Pfizer vaccine to their patients remained a priority. Four hundred and sixty-nine (88.0%) of respondents felt they received their vaccine either on time or earlier than they expected.

Although our survey does not reflect the opinions of the senior population of Galway as a whole, our study stresses the importance of placing the patient's experience as the centre of health care. Exploring one's perceptions, concerns, and expectations remain central to wholistic patient-centred care allowing for both praise and constructive feedback. Future studies exploring the opinion on subsequent booster vaccinations, the evolution of restrictions in Ireland, and perceptions of safety would provide great insight to the values of patients whom the HSE serves.

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