



Str.Ila Garofolino Vicenza
www.poster.it

e-mail: poster@poster.it

POSTER, a research center active in the field of social research and in particular in the area of science communication and technology innovation, has carried out the first comprehensive survey of opinions and attitudes towards biotechnologies in Italy. The study has been conducted with a telephone survey during the months of May and June 2000 on a representative sample of 1022 subjects.

Data collected provide interesting insights on a series of themes lying at the core of current public and political debates, such as clonation, genetically modified food, IVF as well as on the trustworthiness that people attribute to scientific activities and institutions. The study also allows some comparisons with the research conducted in 1996 at the European level by Eurobarometer.

- **What do Italians think of when they think about biotechnologies?**

With more or less the same frequency a test-tube child (21,7%), a cloned sheep (21,1%) and a tomato that does not go bad (20,1%); less often, artificial organs for transplantation (15,4%) and a man that does not get old. (12,1%). It is interesting to notice that if the term 'genetic engineering' is used instead of "biotechnologies", the interviewees are more likely to recall the image of the cloned sheep rather than the modified tomato.

- **Biotechnologies? I have heard about it on TV.**

The biotechnologies issue has become quite hot within Italian public opinion. Almost three quarters of the sample (71,7%) say they have heard about it in the mass media during the past three months. TV (mentioned by more than half), newspapers and magazines, in this order, seem the most used information channels.

- **What do we know about biotechnologies?**

It is somehow surprising to find out that this great visibility is not accompanied by an adequate knowledge level. More than one quarter of Italian people, in fact, seems to have quite confused information on biotechnologies. 29,9% of them, for instance, agrees with the statement "ordinary tomatoes do not contain genes, while genetically tomatoes do", while 28,8% think that "by eating genetically modified fruit, a person's genes could also become modified"; a similar proportion think that "genetically modified animals are always bigger than ordinary ones". If we add those that patently admit their ignorance on such items (the "don't know" that go from 30% to 47% depending on the item), almost two-thirds of Italian population appear characterized by a widespread lack of information.

- **Are biotechnologies useful or risky?**

The application judged more useful by our interviewees is the "use of genetic tests to detect diseases inherited from our parents" (87,2%), which is also considered the least risky (however, 24% think it is risky). Almost two-thirds (61,9%) deem useful also the development of genetically modified animals for laboratory research, while on the usefulness of introducing human genes into animals to produce organs for transplantation the sample is split into half (useful for 51,9%); even less is the proportion of those who consider useful modifying fruit and

vegetables genes to make them more resistant to parasites (39,5%). These last three applications are also considered risky by more than half of the interviewees: the most feared one is the modification of fruit and vegetables genes, considered very risky by 61%.

- **Whom do Italians trust with regard to biotechnologies?**

Interviewees were asked to assess the credibility of different sources. The source considered more credible are consumer organizations (38,5% consider them reliable). Environmental organizations (20,4%) and universities (19%) follow. Behind these three, trust declines even more visibly; religious organizations are mentioned by 6,4% and private enterprises by 2,8%. Even worse is the judgement of public institutions and parties, considered trustworthy by 2% and 0,9% of the sample.

The survey on "Biotechnologies and Public Opinion in Italy" has been conducted by **POSTER** under the supervision of **Federico Neresini** (University of Padua) and **Massimiano Bucchi** (University of Trento). **Giuseppe Pellegrini** (Università di Padova) has been responsible for field research.

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