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*Public opinion and biotechnologies in Italy:  
results from the second survey*

**"Italians ask to be more involved in decisions regarding biotechnology research and applications"**

**Poster Research Centre**, in collaboration with **Giannino Bassetti Foundation**, has carried out the second comprehensive survey of opinions and attitudes towards biotechnologies in Italy. The study has been conducted with a telephone survey during November 2001 on a representative sample of 1017 subjects, stratified by gender, age and region..

Data collected provide interesting insights on a series of themes lying at the core of current public and political debates, such as cloning, genetically modified food, IVF as well as on the trustworthiness that Italian citizens attribute to scientific activities and institutions. The study also allows comparisons with the previous edition, carried out in 2000.

- **Are biotechnologies losing visibility?**

Probably overwhelmed by other pressing issues, biotechnology slightly loses visibility compared to the 2000 survey, going back to 1996 figures as measured by the Eurobarometer: one Italian out of two (50%) has heard about biotechnologies from the media during the previous three months. TV decreases its role as information medium (it is cited by 69% of respondents, compared 82% in the previous survey), while figures regarding the daily press, magazines and radio remain stable. One third (32%) have talked at least occasionally about biotechnologies with somebody during the previous three months (5% say it is a frequent topic of talk)

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

The level of information of Italians with regard to biotechnologies, already quite low in 2000, further decreases.

One quarter of the interviewees, in facts, appear to have rather confused information on biotechnologies. 30% of them, for instance, believe that "only genetically modified tomatoes contain genes – while ordinary tomatoes don't "; 37% believe that genetically modified animals are always larger than the normal ones. The number of Italians who patently admit their ignorance on these matters (about four citizens over ten) further increases compared with the 2000 survey. On the whole, almost two-thirds of the Italian population seem to be characterized by a widespread lack of information.

- **Are biotechnologies useful or risky?**

Unlike the citizens of other European countries, the Italian public continues to make a sharp distinction between medical/health biotechnology and agro-food industry applications. In the first area, risks, although very clearly detected, are counterbalanced by potential benefits, as in the case of xenotransplants (48% say it is useful to insert human genes into animals to produce organs to be transplanted). An exception is cloning for reproductive purposes: only 24% consider it useful, while more than 70% believe it to be risky (80% consider it ethically unacceptable).

Hostility to biotechnology applications in food industry is more widespread. Two out of three Italians deem GM food risky. Only one out of five would buy GM fruit, even if such fruits tasted better than the 'traditional ones'; only one out of ten would buy them if they were cheaper than the 'traditional' ones.

- **What should be done to develop and regulate the biotechnology sector?**

Italians do not feel protected enough by the existing legislation from possible risks connected to biotechnology use. 72% think that existing laws are inadequate. Almost all the subjects interviewed (95% with an increase in comparison to the 2000 survey) agree that GM food should have specific labels. Little agreement seems to exist on the need to accept some risk connected to biotechnology to allow Italian industry to be competitive with other European countries (19%, with a decrease with regard to the 2000 survey), or to help to feed world's starving population. It should be noted that one out of three interviewees (38%) would in no case allow commercialisation of genetically modified food, not even if risks and benefits would be clearly detected.

- **Who should decide?**

A vast majority think that scientists should not be left the freedom to conduct research on biotechnologies; two out of three (63.9%) believe that decisions in this field should not be left to private enterprises. It is also quite clear that the public wants to have a say in the decision making process regarding biotechnologies. The answer to the question on 'who should decide?' puts "all citizens" at the second place (22%), right after "government" and even ahead of scientists themselves (20%). This willingness to participate in the decision making process is confirmed by the fact that over one quarter (28%) of interviewees would like to participate in a public event (forum, consensus conference) to discuss biotechnology issues with scientists, politicians and journalists.

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

Interviewees were asked to assess the credibility of different sources. Consumers' organisations (42.3%) are considered the most reliable source, continuing to increase their appeal among the Italian public (25,3% in the 1996 Eurobarometer survey, 35,8% in our 2000 survey). Other reliable sources of information are University and scientists (19.6% of the respondents), while environmental organizations continue to lose credibility. At the lowest ranks of reliability, one can still notice a slightly an increasing trust on the public sector (10%) and on private enterprises (4.3%) and a sharply decreasing trust on religious organizations (from 9% to 2.8% in one year span of time).

- **Does information matter?**

Data collected in 2001 seem to confirm that the causal link between media exposure to science, information and attitudes to biotechnology should be reconsidered. Not only high exposure to

science in the media does not significantly reduce opposition to biotechnology applications – such as "taking genes from plant species and transferring them into crop plants, to make them more resistant to insect pests" or "Introducing human genes into animals to produce organs for human transplants, such as into pigs for human heart transplants" – but links with greater criticism with regard to some applications. Those who deem ethically unacceptable research on embryos, for instance, are in greater proportion among the most exposed subjects (64% vs. 59% among the less exposed); 80% of regular consumers of science in the media consider reproductive cloning useless (76% among low consumers).

Still, a good level of information does not *per se* guarantee a positive attitude: 49% of those better informed think that transferring genes into fruit or vegetables is useless, and 54% think it is risky. Moral acceptability of embryo research does not vary at all with information (60% in both groups consider it unacceptable), while cloning for reproductive purposes is even more severely judged by the more informed.

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

The study was partly sponsored by **Giannino Bassetti Foundation for Responsibility in Innovation**.

**Poster** is a research center specialized in the analysis of public participation in the area of science, technology and health. In 2000 it has conducted the first survey on "Public opinion and Biotechnologies in Italy". Among Poster's several current projects, a study on "Public Participation and Biotechnology Regulation in Europe" and a study of public visits to European science laboratories.

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