

COVID-19 "vaccine hesitancy"™ study in Belgium

"There is no point in procuring large quantities of Corona vaccines if a substantial number of people will refuse to get vaccinated."

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Dit is de omschrijving

In a new study, researchers at the Institute of Tropical Medicine (ITM) in Antwerp investigate the reason why people are reluctant to be vaccinated against the COVID-19 virus disease. They will proactively map vaccine hesitancy in Belgium based on an open dialogue with the population and public health authorities and an analysis of social media posts. The results of their study could help the roll out of an effective and targeted national COVID-19 vaccination campaign. The research project is coordinated by ITM, in close collaboration with KU Leuven, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) and l'Institut Pasteur in Paris and is funded by Research Foundation - Flanders (FWO).

At the beginning of this week our health ministers announced that vaccination against the virus will be free of charge and voluntary. The objective is to get 70 percent of the population vaccinated to provide individual protection and potential herd immunity to contain the further spread of the virus. Many people are, however, 'vaccine hesitant'. Prof Koen Peeters from ITM explains: "A distrust of science and authorities are among the reasons why people are hesitant about getting vaccinated. The pandemic has contributed to an increased sense of uncertainty and fear which in turn reinforces vaccine hesitancy and raises more questions about the safety and effectiveness of rapidly developed vaccines. It is essential that we know the population's attitude towards these vaccines before making it available and launching a vaccination campaign."

The researchers will engage in a dialogue with several Belgian population groups and the public health authorities to identify these doubts. They will also analyse posts on social media platforms like Twitter. The project aims to map qualitatively and quantitatively online and offline vaccine hesitancy data. Dr Charlotte Gryseels from ITM: "There is little point in procuring large quantities of coronavirus vaccines if a substantial number of people are unwilling to get vaccinated. The Belgian public health authorities need a vaccination strategy that leaves room for dialogue with the population about the reasons why they doubt the safety or effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines. The results of this research can steer the roll-out of targeted vaccination campaigns."

Support for 11 research projects

This project is one of eleven Flemish research projects on COVID-19 in different scientific domains, approved and funded by the Flemish Minister of Economy, Innovation and Science, Hilde Crevits. After an initial call by the Minister and the Research Foundation - Flanders (FWO), nine scientific projects were selected which focused on the clinical and epidemiological aspects of the corona crisis. However, as the pandemic evolved it was clear that the coronavirus was going to have long lasting consequences for our well-being, the social and economic fabric of our society, and education. Therefore, a second call was launched. Eleven projects have now been selected for which the Department has provided €2.5 million in funding. "The current pandemic has changed the daily life of each of us and will have lasting consequences. Research and new knowledge are desperately needed to anticipate these challenges and minimise their impact", says Hilde Crevits, Flemish Minister of Economy, Innovation and Science.