

Assessment of Vaccine Hesitancy to a COVID-19 Vaccine in Cameroonian Adults and Its Global Implication

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Abstract

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in December 2019, no global consensus treatment has been developed and generally accepted for the disease. However, eradicating the disease will require a safe and efficacious vaccine. In order to prepare for the eventual development of a safe and efficacious COVID-19 vaccine and to enhance its uptake, it is imperative to assess vaccine hesitancy in Cameroonians. After obtaining ethical clearance from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Buea, a questionnaire was administered (May–August 2020) to consenting adults either online or in person. A qualitative thematic analysis was done to analyze the participants' answers to the open questions. A deductive approach was used, that is, the codes and patterns according to the World Health Organization (WHO) Strategic Advisory Group of Experts (SAGE) Working Group Matrix of Determinants of vaccine hesitancy. The number of consenting adult Cameroonians who completed the questionnaire were 2512 (Two thousand five hundred and twelve). Vaccine hesitancy to a COVID-19 vaccine was 84.6% in Cameroonians. Using the WHO recommended Matrix of Determinant of Vaccine hesitancy, the most prominent determinants observed in this study were: Communication and Media Environment, Perception of pharmaceutical industry, Reliability and/or source of vaccine and cost. Most Cameroonians agree that even though there are benefits of a clinical trial, they will prefer it should be done out of the continent and involving African scientists for eventual acceptance and uptake. The concerns of safety, efficacy and confidence has to be addressed using a Public Engagement approach if a COVID-19 vaccine has to be administered successfully in Africa or Cameroon specifically. Since this study was carried out following WHO standards, its result can be compared to those of other studies carried out in different cultural settings using similar standards.

Since the first diagnosed case of COVID-19 in December 2019, the number of new infections and fatalities continue to rise in some countries leading to a pandemic that is yet to be put under

control. The World Health Organization (WHO) is yet to confirm and endorse a treatment of the disease and it is now a general consensus that the spread of the disease can be stopped by strict application of the barrier measures while eradicating the disease will require a vaccine. However, for the approved vaccines to achieve its intended goal, VH has to be reduced to under 30%–25%. It is therefore imperative to assess VH and its determinants locally in order to strategize and achieve significant vaccine acceptance. Here we report the first results of VH among Cameroonians using WHO SAGE recommendations.

It has been shown that a major source of access to health-related information is the Internet and Social media in particular. This has also been used by activists to carry out campaigns against the scientific institutions. Studying the Internet content has also shown that future public health interventions need not only focus on the benefits of COVID-19 vaccination but, more so, on understanding the type of doubts around COVID-19 VH issue in order to enhance communication strategies.

Another item of the Matrix of Determinant of VH that came up strongly in this study is “Reliability and/or source of vaccine”. This shows the level of confidence and trust issues Cameroonians will have with a COVID-19 vaccine. Comments from participants show that they are really concerned about who is producing the vaccine and what will be the true intention of administering these vaccines to Cameroonians.

The next most frequent item raised by the participants was “Perception of pharmaceutical industry”. This seems to be expected giving the fact that pharmaceutical industries will be directly involved in producing and distributing a COVID-19 vaccine. From the comments of the participants, there seems to be a deep mistrust of pharmaceutical industries, especially those in the Western countries and in China. Respondents have the impression that the companies are interested only in making profit instead of thinking of the health of the population. It has been shown that people turn to be worried about risks produced by people or institutions they do not trust.

This study shows that Cameroonians will like Cameroonians or African scientists to be involved in the development of a COVID-19 vaccine. This again has to do with the level of trust they have in foreign institutions and pharmaceutical companies when it comes to a COVID-19 vaccine. The assumption here is that seeing one of theirs in the research team developing a vaccine will increase confidence.

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