

# Type: Interview

2022

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 **Stigma associated with COVID-19 and vaccination**

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### Notes to the Broadcaster

The COVID-19 pandemic broke out on November 16, 2019 in Wuhan, China. It spread rapidly around the world, causing several million deaths. The impact of the pandemic led to a revolution in the way vaccines are produced. For vaccines that typically took a decade to be licensed, less than two years were needed to produce several to combat COVID-19, though the manufacturing process adhered to scientific standards.

However, the lack of information about the disease, the mistrust of vaccines and the occasional appearance of side effects in the first people to be vaccinated, raised many concerns, and amplified misinformation about vaccination. Also, the fact that the disease is new and virulent has increased the stigma attached to COVID-19 patients and the COVID-19 vaccine. Yet, it can be treated like other diseases that require patient isolation, such as smallpox, measles, and many other diseases for which vaccination is essential. Today, the vaccine against COVID-19 is the best way to protect yourself.

This radio script features the voice of a patient who recovered from COVID-19. It is based on real interviews and gives accurate and proven information about vaccination, thanks to the contributions of two experts.

To produce this script on your station, you can choose to use voice actors or actresses to play the role of the experts or adapt it to your local situation. In this case, be sure to inform your audience at the beginning of the program that the voices are those of actors, not the original interviewees.

Similarly, you may use this script to research a similar topic in your area and write your own script. For example, you might ask your interviewees the following questions:

* How can the community be involved in reducing the stigmatization of COVID-19 patients?
* Why are there so many vaccines for the same disease?
* Why do we need to observe protection measures even after vaccination?
* Has the abundant media coverage of COVID-19 and the COVID-19 vaccines contributed to the spread of fake news?

Estimated duration of the radio script with music, intro and extro: 30 min

Fade up signature tune, then out

**HOST:** Dear listeners, welcome to today's program. Judging by the extent to which fake news about COVID-19 is spreading, the stigma attached to the disease and to COVID-19 vaccination is still very much alive.

 In this program, we hope to raise awareness about the impact of this stigma on COVID-19 patients and to recognize ongoing efforts to ensure that people can be safely vaccinated.

To discuss this topic, we welcome three speakers. First, Dr. Koabié Bakouan is the chief physician of the Nouna district. He will be followed by Tasseré Kaboré, who is in charge of communication at the Directorate of Prevention through Immunization, and is a former COVAX consultant at UNICEF. Finally, a patient who recovered from COVID-19 has agreed to be interviewed on condition of anonymity.

Fade up of instrumental music, then fade out

**HOST:** Gentlemen, welcome to our studios.

 Let's start with Dr. Koabié Bakouan. He is the head doctor at a health centre in Nouna district. Dr. Koabié Bakouan, have you ever received patients with COVID-19 who have recovered?

**DR. Koabie Bakouan:** Yes, we have. Unfortunately, we found that not all these patients were vaccinated. With them, the urgency was no longer raising their awareness, but helping them get well again.

**HOST:** Some people are concerned that vaccination against COVID-19 will weaken their immunity. How do you respond to that, Mr. Tasseré Kaboré?

**TASSERE KABORE:** To date, more than 60% of the world's population has safely received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. Nearly eight billion doses have been administered worldwide, and several million are now administered every day. COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective. They were tested on tens of thousands of subjects in clinical trials.

The vaccines have successfully met rigorous scientific standards worldwide, as well as in Burkina Faso. These standards relate to the safety, efficacy, and manufacturing quality required for a vaccine's approval or licensing. Like all vaccines, they have been and will continue to be monitored for safety through surveillance and management of side effects. From this point of view, vaccines can in no way weaken immunity in a vaccinated subject—quite the contrary. I can confirm the effectiveness of the vaccines provided in Burkina Faso.

**HOST:** But why is there such a general outcry against vaccines?

**TASSERE KABORE:** The general outcry against COVID-19 vaccines is due to denial of the disease, insufficient information, fake news, fear of side effects, the rapid development of vaccines, disinformation, and the over-abundance of media attention to the issue, among many other factors.

**HOST:** A patient who has recovered from COVID-19 has agreed to speak anonymously in our studios. Tell us, how did you get the disease?

**PATIENT:** I can't tell you exactly. I haven't been able to figure it out. I was in the capital city visiting my family. I met a few acquaintances, but they were all in good health. It was during the first outbreak of the disease in Burkina Faso, between March and April 2020. Protective measures were encouraged but not strict. I entered a public transport bus where only a few of the passengers, including myself, had masks. I don't know exactly where I contracted COVID-19, since none of my family members in the capital have had the disease. I may have been infected by acquaintances I visited or on the bus, since we were travelling in a confined environment for four or five hours.

**HOST:** How did you know you were sick?

**Patient:**  Four to five days after arriving at my workplace, I was constantly feeling tired, with frequent migraines and general discomfort. I informed my supervisor of my condition and then decided to isolate myself in order not to put others in danger. A medical team came to take a sample and confirmed ten days later that I was indeed ill with COVID-19.

**HOST:** How did people behave towards you during your illness?

**PATIENT:** The tenants I lived with in the common courtyard were all very uncomfortable. Everyone shunned me. Luckily, I live alone. The medical team tried to hide my identity by visiting at night. But their “white-coat attire” intrigued people. I stayed alone, locked in the house for more than twenty days, like a prisoner. Only the medical team was allowed to bring me food and water. I almost became depressed. It was only the constant calls from my wife and family that kept my spirits up and prevented me from breaking down. Every day, the government gave me an update on the progress of the disease. I dwelt on the number of deaths, hoping that I would not be next. I lived in anguish.

**HOST:** Dr. Koabié Bakouan, the patient says he suffered from stigmatization because he was sick with COVID-19. How do you explain this?

**DR. KOABIE BAKOUAN:** Stigma related to COVID-19 is the public denunciation or criticism of someone who has the COVID-19 disease. It can force patients to hide their identity because, if their infection were known, it could be harmful to them. This is the case for carriers of HIV and COVID-19. Stigmatization can be especially dangerous when it is associated with an ethnic or social group. The international community has raised concerns about media outlets that talk about "Chinese COVID" or to refer to patients as "COVID cases."

**HOST:** In your opinion, Mr. Tasséré Kaboré, can anyone be subject to this stigmatization?

**TASSERE KABORE:** The novelty of COVID-19 and the fear of the unknown have led to the stigmatization of COVID-19. This stigma is shown in rejecting people who are ill or who work in COVID-19 testing and treatment centres by their relatives, co-workers, colleagues—and even their neighbours.

**HOST:** After your recovery, how did the people around you react?

**PATIENT:** When I went out, I sensed these stares of accusation. It was as if it was my fault that the disease has arrived in this area. I didn't feel much compassion from those around me or understanding that I was an involuntary victim of this disease. For some, I had become a "COVID case." My friends and acquaintances distanced themselves from me.

But when the disease started to appear in two or three other places in my city, people began to understand that it could happen to anyone. It was only then that some people sympathized with me. But it was too late, my life had already been impacted.

**HOST:** Dr., what should one do when faced with stigma?

**DR. KOABIE BAKOUAN:** Trust the health services and have empathy for the people affected. Try to understand the disease and adopt practical and effective measures that can help people to protect themselves and their loved ones.

The disease was first reported in Asia. But this is not a reason to say "Asian or Chinese COVID-19" or even to refer to people with the disease as "COVID-19 cases." Finally, one should not repeat or spread unconfirmed rumours.

**HOST:** Thank you for the clarification. We now return to our recovered COVID-19 patient, to find out what is his biggest regret today, between not having received the vaccination in time or having listened to the rumours.

**PATIENT:** During my illness, I felt guilty about being the first to contract COVID-19 in my area. Unfortunately, we who were the first to be infected by the disease in Burkina Faso suffered a lot. There was no vaccination. The messages on protection measures were not well-publicized. My biggest regret is that I did not take enough precautions, especially by respecting the protective measures. In this respect, I can say that the rumours led us to conceal the reality of the disease.

**HOST:** After your recovery, why did you agree to get the COVID-19 vaccination?

**PATIENT:** When you recover from a devastating disease, you realize the importance of life. I was vaccinated to protect myself and those around me. I wouldn't wish anyone to feel the way I did during this illness.

**HOST:** Speaking of vaccines, in the past, it often took a decade of testing before they were approved. Mr. Kaboré, how is it that the COVID-19 vaccine was put on the market so quickly, barely one year after the discovery of the disease?

**TASSERE KABORE:** Vaccination against COVID-19 has benefited from advances in research on SARS-CoV-1, which was responsible for the SARS or severe acute respiratory syndrome outbreak in 2003. These are both viruses that belong to the coronavirus family that scientists have been studying for a long time. The combination of global efforts, collaboration, and availability of resources accelerated the process of developing a vaccine to address the emergency.

**HOST:** Dr. Bakouan, does immunization exempt us from taking precautionary measures such as wearing masks?

**DR. KOABIE BAKOUAN:** Absolutely not! Being vaccinated is not a total return to freedom, to close contact with strangers. The vaccine protects against severe forms of the disease and death. But it is important that vaccinated people continue to observe protective measures such as wearing masks to protect themselves from infection and avoid infecting their loved ones, though of course they are less likely to be infected than people who are not vaccinated.

**HOST:** Mr. Kaboré, does vaccination against COVID-19 make a man or woman sterile or infertile?

**TASSERE KABORE:** No! Vaccines against infections cannot make a man or a woman sterile or infertile. Unfortunately, many people believe in fake news that continuously spread false information.

**HOST:** What impacts do false rumors have on COVID-19 vaccination?

**TASSERE KABORE:** They create anxiety and a reluctance to get vaccinated. They can also lead to denial of the disease and the relaxation of prevention measures.

**HOST:** To our guest who had the disease, did you experience any adverse effects from COVID-19?

**PATIENT:** Fortunately, I did not have any serious symptoms. And for that, I commend the medical team that took care of me. They constantly asked me about the slightest abnormal symptoms, which they quickly treated. The team took care of me 24 hours a day like a baby.

**HOST:** Dr. Bakouan, our guest who had the disease recovered with no serious symptoms. What are the possible symptoms of COVID-19?

**DR. KOABIE BAKOUAN:** We distinguish between temporary and long-term symptoms. Temporary symptoms include neurological problems such as mental difficulties, headaches, chest pain and tightness, coughing, smell and taste problems, pain, digestive problems, and skin problems.

With regard to the long-term consequences, there are sometimes irreversible impacts on people who develop a severe form of COVID-19. COVID-19 can affect the heart, the lungs, and the brain in many different ways. Then, the immune system reacts and becomes overwhelmed, creating inflammation. This inflammation can cause acute respiratory distress syndrome. There are also lung problems that can hamper a patient's ability to breathe.

**HOST:** Some people worry about the effects of the vaccine. Is this based on misinformation or are their fears realistic?

**DR. KOABIE BAKOUAN:** At the beginning, there were many fears about the effects of the vaccine. But with time, we understood that these fears were triggered by fake news. As of June 3, 2022, some 62,812 people have been vaccinated in our district, including 33,908 women. Like the vaccines that we use for children, the COVID-19 vaccine is safe and effective at preventing severe disease and death.

**HOST:** Mr. Kaboré, you encourage people to get vaccinated. Are you vaccinated yourself?

**TASSERE KABORE:** Of course! I am one of the people who believed in the vaccine and who was vaccinated when the COVID-19 vaccine was first introduced in Burkina Faso.

**HOST:** What motivated you to get vaccinated?

**TASSERE KABORE:** What motivated me was my belief that vaccination is a known and recognized weapon to fight epidemics, including COVID-19. For example, vaccination has made it possible to eradicate smallpox. In health facilities, from birth, a baby follows a vaccination schedule against diphtheria, polio, whooping cough, tuberculosis, yellow fever, measles, mumps, and rubella until the age of two. Sometimes, before the child reaches the age of five, the Ministry of Health introduces other vaccines to prevent other types of diseases. Why do some people accept these vaccines and their side effects but criticize the COVID-19 vaccine?

Getting vaccinated against COVID-19 boosts immunity and protects the elderly and others with chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, chronic respiratory conditions, or diabetes. In addition, I got vaccinated to protect my family, friends, and family circle from COVID-19. The same reasoning should guide all of us.

**HOST:** How did you react to the worries of those around you?

**TASSERE KABORE:**  It is true that some of my friends and relatives thought I was unusual, but I remained calm because I was convinced that vaccination was good for me. Fortunately, all those who criticized me are now vaccinated.

**HOST:** When confronted with misinformation, which sources of information on COVID-19 should people use?

**DR. KOABIE BAKOUAN:** The sources of COVID-19 information should be health workers and information produced by the Ministry of Health and its partners.

**HOST:** Who among the most vulnerable, such as the elderly, pregnant women, children, and newborns, cannot be vaccinated?

**TASSERE KABORE:**  The elderly and pregnant women can be vaccinated, and we encourage them to get vaccinated because they are at a higher risk of suffering from severe disease and dying from COVID-19. Children between 12 and 17 years old can be vaccinated with parental authorization. However, there are still no pediatric doses for the vaccination of children under 12 in Burkina Faso.

**HOST:** What is the best option to protect yourself against COVID-19?

**TASSERE KABORE:** The best way to protect yourself is to get vaccinated and to observe protective measures such as wearing a mask.

**HOST:** How much do people pay to be vaccinated?

**TASSERE KABORE:** Vaccination against COVID-19 is completely free in Burkina Faso. The government and its partners have subsidized the vaccine in order to reduce the health costs for families.

**HOST:** Do you think that this free access is the reason for the reluctance to get vaccinated?

**DR. KOABIE BAKOUAN:** I don't think so. In fact, it is the availability of vaccines that is the problem, especially in Africa. Generally, Africans believe that what is free is not good quality. But in this case, they see free vaccines as a relief—a support from the government and its partners to help the vulnerable. Secondly, in my opinion, the reluctance results from the inability of the government to maintain restrictions, for example on using public transport, access to theatres, sports grounds, and other spaces. Finally, it should be noted that COVID-19 seems to have been less deadly in Africa than in the rest of the world. While the World Health Organization declared that Africa would be hit hard, the opposite has fueled all sorts of fake news. This is also one of the reasons for the reluctance to get vaccinated.

**HOST:** How should someone who is criticized for wearing a mask all the time react?

**TASSERE KABORE:** They should continue to use protective measures promoted to fight against COVID-19, and get vaccinated to protecting themselves and others.

**HOST:** As someone who has recovered from COVID-19, what do you think of those who doubt the effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccine?

**PATIENT:** Anyone who has seen death in the face does not doubt the effectiveness of the vaccine. I have been doing well since I was vaccinated and so has my family. We must salute the scientists who developed vaccines in record time. If the scientists had not produced anything, the same doubters would call them incompetent.

**HOST:** What advice do you have for people who believe the rumours and refuse to be vaccinated?

**PATIENT:** My first advice is to listen to official information in messages from the Ministry of Health and its partners. Secondly, beware of sources that discourage people from getting vaccinated, using conspiracy information as a pretext. My third piece of advice is not to be a vector of disease for others if you truly love them. Finally, the most important thing is to observe protective measures and get vaccinated.

**HOST:** We are at the end of our program on the stigma associated with COVID-19 and vaccination against it. History has shown that epidemics and pandemics tend to generate stigma and discrimination between the sick and the healthy. Therefore, we need to fight against misinformation on a daily basis. COVID-19 patients must be treated with great care. Science has produced vaccines to protect people, and these must be accepted and promoted.

Our sincere thanks go to our guests, Mr. Tasseré Kaboré, Communication Officer at the Directorate of Prevention through vaccination and former COVAX consultant at UNICEF; Dr. Koabié Bakouan, Chief Medical Officer of the Nouna district; and our guest who recovered from COVID-19. His testimony gives ample proof that one can recover from COVID-19 and live a full life. Thank you also to our listeners. We'll be back next week for another program. Until then, stay well.

**Acknowledgements**

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Interviews:

Mr. Tasseré Kaboré, Communication Officer at the Directorate of Prevention through Vaccination, former COVAX consultant at UNICEF. Interview conducted in June 2022

Dr. Koabié Bakouan, Chief Medical Officer of the Nouna district (Burkina Faso). Interview conducted in June 2022.

The patient recovered from COVID-19. Interview conducted in May 2022.

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