A climate of controversy surrounding the price of medicines and access to treatment is the backdrop to Leem’s 6th survey wave of the Observatoire Sociétal du Médicament. The survey paints a nuanced picture of the perception and relationship that the French have towards medicines. Confidence in medicines is still very high but is deteriorating for vaccines, scepticism towards which is of growing concern.

Despite falling slightly, confidence in medicines is still very high

84% of French people have confidence in medicines. Although confidence remains very high (-1 point compared to 2015), it has declined for almost all medicines: prescription medicines (88%, -5 points), reimbursable medicines (88%, -4 points), branded medicines (87%, -2 points), non-reimbursable (74%, -1 point) and non-prescription medicines (70%, -3 points) and vaccines (69%, -2 points). Homoeopathy alone has growing appeal to the French, confidence levels in which rising by 2 points to 73%. Confidence in generics meanwhile remains at the same level as in 2015 (68%).

Distrust in vaccines is of growing concern

The decline in confidence is not steep but it is symptomatic. Two points down compared to 2015, confidence in vaccines has fallen to its lowest recorded level (69%) since the launch of the Observatoire Sociétal du Médicament in 2012. Only one in two French people now think that vaccinations bring more benefits than risks. Perceptions vary from one generation to another: 63% of 55-59 year olds agree with the statement that vaccines are more beneficial than harmful. This figure, however, is only 43% among 25-34 year olds. What is more, 40% of French respondents do not know if their vaccines are up to date.

Healthcare professionals are still listened to but whistleblowers are on the increase

Healthcare professionals are still regarded by the French as the most reliable sources of information on medicines. However, trust in family doctors (93%, -2 points), medical specialists (92%, -4 points), nurses (89%, -2 points) or pharmacists (88%, -2 points) fell slightly compared to the 2015 survey while reliance on whistleblowers for information on medicines is surging (69%, +24 points).

It is worth noting that confidence in pharmaceutical companies fell by 4 points: only 45% of French people trust them for information on medicines. They are, however, still ahead of the press (37%), radio (34%), television (27%), Internet (24%) and politicians (12%).

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1 Ipsos online survey conducted for Leem between 9 February and 16 June 2016 amongst 1,000 respondents (representative sample of the French population aged 18 years and over).
Reputation: pharmaceutical companies score an above-average rating

A further feature of this latest wave of Leem's annual survey is the deteriorating image of business in general, regardless of the sector in which they operate. The impact is however more pronounced for some sectors. Still reeling from the Volkswagen emissions scandal, car manufacturing recorded the biggest decrease (55% - 14 points compared to 2015). Food and retail also recorded a higher-than-average decline in confidence levels (-6 and -5 points respectively compared to 2015). No one is spared, not even aeronautics which ranks top for the second consecutive year (confidence level of 72% but down 4 points from 2015). Pharmaceutical companies, though also affected (-6 points compared to 2015), nevertheless share 3rd place with automotive companies in the rankings of most trusted industries, with a confidence rating of 55%.

Usefulness, efficiency and innovation: three characteristics that best describe pharmaceutical companies

Despite a slight dip, pharmaceutical companies are still overwhelmingly perceived as useful (85%, -2 points), cutting edge (78%, -2 points) and effective (71%, -5 points). Encouragingly, they were slightly up in terms of conduct scores: the French regard them as slightly less opaque, though the figure remains high (69% of French respondents regard them as opaque, a 4-point improvement), more environmentally friendly (33%, +3 points) and more respectful of their employees (54%, +2 points). Pharmaceutical companies are also faring better on honesty (30%, +3 points) and transparency (19%, +1 point), even if the scores on these items remain low. This slight boost to their image is matched by French people's opinion on the regulation of companies in this sector: 44% agree with the statement that these companies are highly regulated by government (+3 points compared to 2015).

"Despite public mood affected by a number of controversies surrounding treatment price or accessibility, the French have reaffirmed their confidence in medicines, concludes Brice Dyer, Deputy CEO of Ipsos France. At the same time, the decline in trust in traditional medical figures such as doctors (GPs or specialists), nurses or pharmacists for information on medicines can be analysed in the light of the broader crisis of public confidence in authorities and experts that has grown in recent years. Healthcare professionals are no exception. This though is a worrying trend when it comes to vaccines and French people's concerns over their efficacy or indeed harmfulness. If trust in healthcare professionals to deliver information on medicines continues to erode, who in future will be able to effectively combat this wave of distrust in vaccinations?"

"Confidence levels in medicines remain very high despite an overall deterioration in the confidence indicators. This positive result is unfortunately offset by the growing distrust in vaccines, Leem's Director General Philippe Lamoureux points out. France, the homeland of Pasteur, is now the world's leading vaccine sceptic. The situation is worrying. Immunisation is currently able to prevent 28 infectious diseases. As key vaccine providers, pharmaceutical companies are concerned to ensure that vaccines remain a major tool in the prevention of serious and often fatal infectious diseases. Public education, information, consultation with health authorities, anticipating shortfalls in supply ... only collectively can health industry stakeholders - manufacturers, healthcare professionals, patients and public authorities - succeed in restoring French confidence in immunisation.

The full findings can be found at: www.leem.org

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1 Conducted from September to December 2015 by researchers in the Vaccine Confidence Project at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, this global study involving 66,000 people from 67 countries shows that France is the least confident country, with 41% of those surveyed sceptical of the safety of vaccines (more than three times the global average).