
COVID-19. Bertini (Lumsa): "The pandemic has taught us to give importance to words"

To reconsider the criteria of the daily bulletin on Covid-19, highlighting - as far as deaths and hospitalisations are concerned – data on the vaccinated and the unvaccinated. The Government is planning a change of pace, or rather, a change in the narrative of the pandemic, to be adopted in the coming days. Yet, how does reshuffling the numbers affect the general population? Professor Patrizia Bertini Malgarini, professor of Italian Linguistics, head of the Department of Human Sciences at Lumsa University, explains to SIR the extent to which the pandemic has taught us that words and communication have an impact on people's lives. **Professor, the government is intent on presenting pandemic data in a different way. In your opinion, what effect would this have?** At first glance, numbers may seem the most reliable element, but in fact they are highly susceptible to manipulation. *Depending on how they are presented, numbers can say different things.* It is up to the experts to decide how COVID cases are going to be reported, and I won't go into that. However, it must be said that political expediency must not prevail over the reasons of public health. It is worth remembering that the ministry concerned is called the 'Ministry of Health', so whatever involves reporting data must be consistent with the interests of public health. **Has the pandemic highlighted the need to improve public communication?** *Over the years we have been neglecting the role of communication, and we have come to realise just how important it is today.* Those who work in the field of communication should be consulted on how to properly inform about such a serious issue. Our university students are facing personal difficulties because over the past two years they have been hit hard by the impact of the pandemic. Sometimes in Italy we resort to English terms such as "lockdown" - which in Italian would be segregation or confinement, i.e. words that evoke unpleasant feelings. So we have been indulging in "lockdown" even though it reflects the reality. This should make us realise how difficult it is to communicate. The very term 'communication' means 'to share', which is not easy to do in these cases and should be entrusted to professionals. *Unfortunately, persons with no experience or expertise were urged to communicate. Hopefully we will learn another lesson from the pandemic: to pay attention to words and the importance of communication.* **In your opinion, is communication being used against the anti-Vax movement?** *Making a list of the good and the bad ones must definitely be avoided.* Otherwise we risk handing over to the anti-Vax activists the banner of protests against the State, against public order. etc. This could be very dangerous because, as we saw in the clashes in Trieste, anyone could take advantage of such protests. Well thought-out communication should prevent this from happening. **How can the pandemic threats be communicated without causing fear?** *This can be done by means of an 'explanatory gloss'.* Namely, when a complex technical concept is used, an effort must be made to provide an explanation in simple terms. This enables even non-experts to understand. This approach was adopted already in the Middle Ages. *The second point is to avoid stirring unnecessary anxiety.* We have seen endless queues of people at testing sites, not only because they needed to be tested, but also because they were overcome by panic. I think the political world and the communication campaign are responsible for that. **What is your assessment of the communication strategy so far?** I would not grade it highly in an exam. They faced the challenge of handling communication addressed to the general public: people with no experience in the field of communication suddenly found themselves in an unprecedented situation. Until a few years ago, the general public had never heard of the virologists we see on television, nor were the virologists used to being interviewed by so many media outlets. Speaking to the public is not easy. A university professor may be used to it, but many of these experts had never stepped out of their lab. This explains some of the mistakes they have made.

