

An educational campaign toward epilepsy among Italian primary school teachers



1. Survey on knowledge and attitudes

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ABSTRACT

A questionnaire survey was undertaken to assess the impact of a nationwide educational campaign about epilepsy on the knowledge and attitudes toward the disease among Italian primary school teachers. Five hundred and eighty-two teachers participated. All interviewees were aware of the existence of epilepsy, and most of them had direct experience with the disease. Answers about frequency, causes, outcome, and response to treatments were variable and not correlated with age, residency, and years of experience. Teachers had positive attitudes toward epilepsy, except for the idea that driving and sports can be safe for people with epilepsy. Epilepsy and its treatment were considered a source of learning disability and social disadvantages. Several teachers declared themselves being unable to help a child having seizures. Calling an ambulance was a frequent action. Knowledge and attitudes toward epilepsy are improved compared with those reported in our previous studies. Although this may be a positive reflection of the increasing knowledge and the greater availability of information on epilepsy, there are still areas of uncertainty and incorrect behaviors.

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1. Introduction

Epilepsy is a common neurological disorder still carrying important discrimination and stigma despite considerable advancements in the scientific knowledge of its causes, mechanisms, and treatments. Children with epilepsy are at particularly high risk of suffering the consequences of discrimination because social maladjustment during childhood may influence academic achievement and have profound reflections later in life. Children spend about 40% of their time at school with teachers. School teachers with correct knowledge of and appropriate attitudes toward epilepsy could put the social reflections of epilepsy in a correct perspective, thus contributing to the reduction of stigma. Public knowledge and attitudes toward epilepsy have been investigated in several countries and have been found to be mostly inadequate [1–15]. Time spent in teaching and experience with students with epilepsy predict better knowledge of the disease [7,10,16]. However, knowledge and attitudes toward epilepsy are susceptible of improvement, as shown by the positive results of educational activities [17–20]. In Italy, our group has recently investigated the knowledge and attitudes toward epilepsy in the general population [21] and among school teachers [22]. One of the results was that Italian teachers have, with some exceptions, a correct knowledge of epilepsy, its causes, outcome, and treatments. In addition, despite having some negative attitudes toward epilepsy, teachers attending disability courses and/or with more direct personal experience with children with epilepsy tend to have a more correct approach to the management of seizures and, in general, are less likely to have discriminatory attitudes compared with the general public. For this reason, we thought that prompting educational interventions for the benefit of the general public and, more specifically, of school teachers could improve the dissemination of knowledge and attitudes and ultimately improve the quality of life of children with epilepsy and their families.

When the results of the teachers' interview [22] were made available, the Italian League Against Epilepsy (LICE) decided to promote a nationwide campaign to improve public knowledge on epilepsy ("Facciamo luce sull'epilessia a scuola", i.e., "Shed light on epilepsy at school"). Against this background, we performed a new survey with a twofold aim: (i) to verify with a number of focused questions the impact of the campaign on the knowledge and attitudes of a new cohort of school teachers as compared with those of the previous teachers' cohort [22] and those of the Italian population [21] and (ii) to impart a more intensive and focused educational program to the same cohort and verify whether the program could result in further improvement to be documented with the same set of questions of the previous survey. The first aim is illustrated here. In doing this, we addressed three fundamental questions: (i) How do the teachers' knowledge of epilepsy and their attitudes toward this disease depend on their personal experience and various demographic factors? (ii) What are the knowledge and attitudes of the teachers as compared with those of the rest of the population? (iii) How did the knowledge and attitudes change as compared with the results of the previous study [22]? The second aim will be developed in a separate report.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Nationwide educational campaign

This included, among others, educational movies, delivery of pamphlets, meetings with neurologists, press releases, TV interviews, and various entertainment events performed at local, regional, and national levels. Most educational activities were performed during the first Sunday of May (elected as the Epilepsy Day in Italy) with the contribution of representatives of the Italian chapter (LICE), one from each administrative district (or group of districts). However, several initiatives were performed in other periods of time, depending on opportunities (e.g., press releases or TV interviews occasioned by

stigmatizing news on epilepsy reported by local or national information sources) and upon specific requests. For further details, see www.lice.it/fondazioneepilessialice/progetti.

2.2. Study structure and population

This study was a two-stage nationwide cross-sectional survey entitled "What do you know about epilepsy". During the first stage, representatives of the Italian chapter (LICE), one from each administrative district (or group of districts) of the Italian territory, were asked to identify a number of primary schools located in their district. The schools were chosen at random, but, within each district, the number was correlated with the size of the local population. Within each school, only teachers representing the first and the second school year were invited to participate in the survey. This age class was selected as being the most critical for access to the child in the social environment and to match the educational material represented by a book of tales. Thirteen of the 15 districts finally participated in the study (Fig. 1). Participating teachers from each selected school were asked to fill out a 28-item questionnaire investigating three major issues: (i) general and specific knowledge about epilepsy, (ii) attitudes toward social and individual implications of epilepsy, and (iii) school-related attitudes. A number of background questions were also asked to obtain the teachers' demographic, educational, and experiential profiles. The results of the first stage have been used to interpret the results of the educational process to be undertaken in the second stage of the study. The format of the questions was identical to that used in the previous survey [22], the difference being only the technique of the interview, i.e., via telephone in the former study and self-administered in the present investigation.

2.3. Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics are reported as mean and standard deviation (SD), median and range or interquartile range (IQR), or count and percentage (%) as appropriate. Demographics (sex, age, and residency),

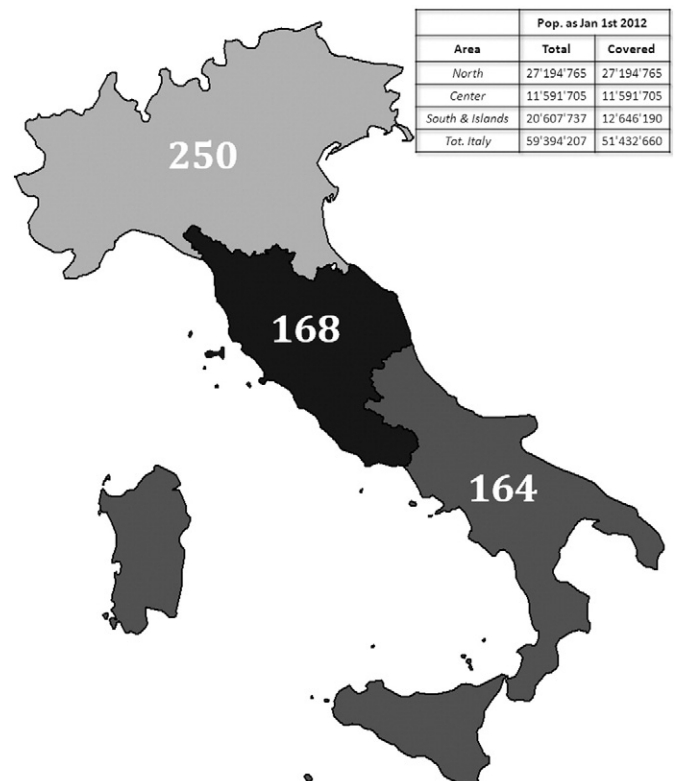


Fig. 1. Italian map including the number of teachers participating in the study.

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