

# How to NOT get a Covid vaccine, in spite of really really trying



by C. Flisi

I woke up so excited that Tuesday. After months of waiting, I was finally going to get my first Covid vaccine. Worth noting that I live in Italy, which is way behind the US in terms of shot distribution, like most of Europe. Worse yet, I live in Lombardia, one of the most mismanaged regions during the pandemic in spite of being the wealthiest, so we lagged neighboring Italian regions in vaccine scheduling.

The road to this late appointment had taken a while. The first vaccines in Lombardia went to essential workers (health care, teachers, public transport, ultra high risk), then nursing home residents, then people

over 80, over 75, over 70, and on down. Appointments could be made on line, through an 800 number, a local pharmacy, or one's primary care physician.

I was ready to pounce on line the day my age group became eligible. A friend flagged me to the fact that appointments opened up for my group a few days before the official date. So I jumped onto the website and started filling out my request. I was annoyed by the location choices presented to me. I live in Busto Arsizio, a town of 85,000 about 21 kilometers north of Milan. Busto has a massive vaccination site at an exhibition center, since it is the largest city in the province of Varese. But there was no option for Busto's site. I had to choose between Milano, involving train, metro, and walking, or the city of Varese, about 30 kilometers north, accessible by car with traffic jams and parking issues. Reluctantly I opted for Milan but wasn't happy about it. Either option would tie me up for half a day.

Over the next week I called and wrote the website repeatedly, asking for availability in my hometown. Actually I tried two websites (region and province) and got the same bad news. The 800 number idem. Then I saw a second 800 number and decided to try that one. Bingo. Not only did I have an appointment close by, but it was almost a week sooner.

Both when I made my appointment and when I changed it, I asked about the vaccines available. At the time, there were three: Astra Zeneca, Pfizer, and Moderna (far less than the other two).

Now here is where things get tricky. Since there is no blood clotting or platelet deficiency in my family's medical history, I wasn't worried about Astra Zeneca's problematics *per se*. But I am taking a drug called Raloxifene to prevent serious bone fracture, and a possible risk of Raloxifene is blood clotting. I accept that risk because I suffered a bone fracture that almost cost me my life, so the tradeoff is reasonable. But I was reluctant to raise the odds against me with a vaccine that *also* predisposed me to blood clots. Two's company but three's a crowd, "two" being Raloxifene and me, "three" being Raloxifene, Astra Zeneca, and me.

So I tried to convey online and in phone conversations the need for Pfizer as "my" vaccine. The message was always, "You won't know till the day of your appointment. The doctor in charge will decide."

I wasn't enthusiastic about waiting in line for an hour to learn that perhaps there was no more Pfizer that day, but at least the local site was

10 minutes away, so I wouldn't be wasting THAT much time. Right?

My appointment was 4:20 pm. I left home 35 minutes early out of an abundance of caution and arrived before 4 pm. Signage was good en route and parking was easy. Volunteers all around directed us to the entrance of the exhibition hall and checked our credentials. At the main gate people were milling around in typical Italian disorganized fashion with a few orange-vested volunteers trying to keep a semblance of order. Some of us had appointments at 4:05, some like me at 4:20, some at 4:30, and some at 4:45. We were allowed past the main gate at 4:10 PM. and moved to the glass entrance doors of the building. One of the orange vests tried to keep us in two clear lines with sufficient distance between people. Haha.

Then he made the mistake of asking everyone who had an appointment up till 4:45 PM to head inside, and 300 of us flowed in. When I asked why the line flow seem to be so erratic, the answer was that computers were to blame. "They've invited too many people for the same appointment time," someone said. To me, that sounded like a programming error, not a computer error.

Making our way through this big hall, volunteers tried to divide us between those who had filled out a pre-vaccine questionnaire and those who had not. Mine was filled out and handy, so I was waved to a table where I showed the form to . . . someone. Maybe a doctor, maybe medical staff, maybe another volunteer. I asked this screener which vaccines were available, since I had clearly written on my form my need for Pfizer. This fellow was indifferent. Not his problem. "Tell it to the doctor before you get the shot," he said.

Another hour and several snaky lines later, I was inside another large interior hall where, it seemed, vaccinations were actually taking place. Finally it was my turn. In a tented section (for privacy), a doctor was sitting at a little desk, along with a nurse assistant and a chair. I showed my form, and explained my need to avoid Astra Zeneca. While they were digesting this, I casually mentioned my need to lie down for my shot. (It's a psychological thing, I explained. "I have given myself shots. I give my dog shots. But it's just better if I lie down for this.")

Now they were in a panic. "We don't have arrangements for that," they said.

"I can lie down on the floor, no problem."

They called for assistance, a stretcher and a wheelchair. While we waited for these items to show up, I repeated my need for the Pfizer shot. The doctor (at least I think he was the doctor) didn't know what Raloxifene was. He looked it up online and announced that it dealt with osteoporosis. not cardio disease. I got annoyed. "Yes I know, but if you read the pamphlet you will see that one of the side effects can be blood clots. I am willing to take the risk for that, but not the additional risk of other blood clots from the Covid vaccine."

The wheelchair showed up along with two husky technicians who were supposed to accompany me to some other place. For what reason, they didn't say. "I'm not going to get in the wheelchair," I stated. "I don't need a wheelchair. I don't need a stretcher. I'm fine. I only need to lie down during the shot. What is this all about?"

The doctor-ignorant-of-Raloxifene waved me away, happy to be rid of me. I walked beside the two technicians across the hall to another tented area where two male medical technicians and two women—one who may have been a nurse and another introduced as "the doctor in charge"—were standing beside a chair with a recline. One of the men did the talking. I looked at the reclined chair, which I assumed was to be used for me when I got my shot, and noted that it was for a right-handed person. "I'm left-handed. Please give me the shot in my right arm," I asked.

"We are not going to give you the shot here," said Mr. Talkative Tech.  
"You're excited. You're nervous. You need to lie down."

I wasn't agitated before but I sure was now. I felt like I'd fallen into the lobotomy scene in *One flew over the cuckoo's nest*.

"I don't need to lie down. I asked for the Pfizer shot and this is what I get? Are you telling me that I waited two hours so that you could tell me that I won't be getting the shot?"

"We can't give everyone the shots they ask for," explained Talkative. "It's too confusing. We are giving out 3,000 shots today."

"In the US they are vaccinating three million people a day, "I pointed out. "So what? I spoke to four different people on two different phone lines and two different web sites before coming here today and explained my problem. Why are you informing me just now after all the time I waited?"

“You can have the shot,” said Talkative. “But we need a note from your *medico di base* (family doctor) saying that you must have the Pfizer shot.”

“Why didn’t anyone tell me this when I was in touch with you before?” I was really angry now.

“Maybe you didn’t speak to the right people,” he suggested.

“I’m a journalist. I am capable of evaluating reliable sources. Are you suggesting that the Covid task force at the provincial and regional levels is not reliable?”

“We can give you a shot tomorrow,” he repeated. “All you need is a note from your family doctor.” An annoying aside: he kept calling my doctor a “he” and I kept correcting him, pointing out that my family doctor is a “she”, but he ignored me. Meanwhile the female doctor supposedly in charge said nothing this entire time.

“If I come back with a note tomorrow, what about the wait in line?”

“Come back tomorrow with your doctor’s letter, and you can skip the outside line. You don’t have to wait another two hours. Just come any time and show the letter at the door. Then walk right in and get your shot.”

“You are telling me I don’t have to waste two hours like today? After all the medical people I spoke to and all the communications, nobody tells me about a doctor’s letter until right now? I am supposed to believe that I won’t wait tomorrow as well?” I grabbed my jacket and purse, pulled down the sleeve of my shirt, and stormed out. I was livid.

At 9 am on Wednesday morning I sent a note to my family doctor, requesting the letter specified by Talkative. She called me at 1 pm with bad news. Why was I not surprised? “Signora, I just received a communication from the Regione Lombardia today. They declared that a *medico di base* CANNOT request a specific vaccine for a patient. That decision can only be made by the doctor administering the vaccine.”

“My instructions yesterday were just the opposite. Precisely and exactly the opposite of what you are saying. Plus, the doctor didn’t even know what Raloxifene IS. He isn’t informed enough to make that decision.”

“Those are the guidelines I received today. I can’t do anything about it.”

Coincidence or something more calculated? One of the two parties was lying but I had no way of knowing which one. I didn't slam down the phone but our conversation did not end diplomatically.

The upshot is that I am left in a high-risk area with no access to the vaccine I need. It's living IN the cuckoo's nest without any way to fly over it . . . or to fly at all. Welcome to Italian medical "organization."

###