New research reveals gaps in public understanding of atrial fibrillation and its link to stroke

Initial findings from the Cardiac Health Observatory uncover critical insights and unmet needs in heart rhythm disorders in France, Italy and the United Kingdom

PARIS, 26 November, 2026 – Details from a research report commissioned by Boston Scientific Corporation revealed significant knowledge gaps in public awareness and understanding of the signs, symptoms and risks of cardiac rhythm disorders, particularly atrial fibrillation (AF), the most common rhythm disorder in Europe.[1] The Cardiac Health Observatory, developed by Boston Scientific in collaboration with University-Hospital Institute (IHU) Liryc, is an ongoing research initiative created to identify opportunities to improve care pathways for people living with cardiac rhythm disorders in Europe. More than 3,000 adults across France, Italy and the United Kingdom (UK)* were surveyed for the initial report.

AF affects more than 11 million people in Europe, and its prevalence is expected to rise further as populations age.[1] The report revealed significant gaps in AF awareness and how to treat it:

- Almost half (48%) of respondents in France said they were unfamiliar with AF as a condition, compared with 28% in the UK and 17% in Italy.
- Only 47% of respondents in France recognised that AF increases stroke risk, compared with 52% in the UK and 60% in Italy.
- Around two-thirds of respondents were unaware that AF can present without symptoms: 68% in France and 67% in both the UK and Italy.
- Only 9% of respondents in France, 15% in the UK and 29% in Italy identified an electrophysiologist as an appropriate specialist to treat AF.

"This Cardiac Health Observatory survey brings to light a paradox we see every day: atrial fibrillation is the most common heart rhythm disorder, yet nearly one in two people in France say they know little about it," says Dr Mélèze Hocini, General Director of IHU Liryc. "This lack of awareness can delay diagnosis, even though acting early can help prevent stroke. This is why we must fully support the implementation of the law establishing a national strategy to tackle cardiovascular and neurovascular diseases and make this a national health priority."

AF is marked by a disorganise, irregular and usually fast heartbeat, causing shortness of breath, chest tightness, pain, light-headedness and fatigue, and significantly affecting quality of life. Critically, the condition is associated with an increased risk of stroke, underlining the importance of early recognition and appropriate management. In France, between 600,000 and one million people are thought to be affected.[2] Beyond its human impact, notably the increased risk of stroke, AF represents a major financial burden: its annual cost in France is estimated at more than €2.5 billion, half of which is attributable to hospitalisations.[2]

In Italy, over one million people aged 65 and over are estimated to be affected by AF, with a prevalence of 7.3% in this age group. The number of people affected is expected to increase by 75% by 2060, reaching approximately 1.9 million.[3] Beyond its human impact, notably the increased risk of stroke, AF represents a major healthcare burden: the annual direct cost of stroke in Italy has been estimated at over €4 billion, with more than a quarter of strokes attributable to AF.[4]

In the UK, AF prevalence has been steadily rising over the past 10 years due to an ageing population. According to the Quality and Outcomes Framework (QOF), AF prevalence in England was 2.2% of the population for 2024/25 compared with 1.4% for the 2010/11 period.[5] According to the Stroke Association, AF contributes to 20% of all strokes[6] and represents a major financial commitment as treating patients with stroke costs the NHS up to £2.2 billion a year.[7]

"The findings of the Cardiac Health Observatory highlight why greater understanding of atrial fibrillation, including recognising the condition and its potential consequences, can be an important step towards accessing appropriate care," said Prof Angelo Auricchio, chief medical officer, Europe, Middle East and Africa, Rhythm Solutions, Boston Scientific. "For people living with AF, the goal is not simply to treat the arrhythmia, but to consider the broader patient journey, including reducing the burden of the disease and helping protect patients from stroke. By working alongside IHU Liryc and physicians and listening to patients' experiences, we can help advance evidence-based approaches to AF care that address the needs that matter most to patients."

For more information about the initial findings from the Cardiac Health Observatory, you can find it here.

About the Cardiac Health Observatory

The Cardiac Health Observatory is a research initiative developed by Boston Scientific in collaboration with IHU Liryc, with independent research conducted by OpinionWay. It is designed to explore opportunities to improve care pathways for people living with cardiac rhythm disorders in Europe. Its insights are intended to increase awareness of underserved cardiac diseases, inform evidence-based polocy discussions and contribute to more coordinated, patient-centred models of cardiac care.

Atrial fibrillation was selected as the focus of the first report considering its increasing prevalence across Europe, and was explored using a two-part methodology across three European countries:

- Quantitative data was collected in September 2026 from 3,004 adults, representative of the general population (1,000 respondents in France; 1,003 respondents in Italy; 1,001 respondents in the UK), exploring level of knowledge and perceptions of cardiac rhythm disorders.

- Qualitative interviews were conducted with eight patients living with AF in France, Italy and the UK, covering their experiences of the condition, their care pathway, undergoing an ablation procedure and expectations for their care.

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