Diseases don’t discriminate.

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A sincere thank you to all who participate in clinical research from the following organizations.

By: Luther T. Clark, MD - Deputy Chief Patient Officer, Merck

The Power of Community Collaborations and Partnerships for Achieving Diversity in Clinical Research

Barriers to participation of racially and ethnically under-represented patients in clinical trials include: (1) mistrust, (2) fear, (3) lack of comfort with the clinical trial process, (4) lack of information about clinical trials, (5) logistical constraints such as time and out-of-pocket expenses. In addition, social and economic factors (the social determinants of health) may negatively impact patients’ willingness to participate in clinical research.

Meaningful patient and community engagement can help achieve diversity as well as advance both science and patient care. In addition to helping empower patients to be more active participants in their medical care, appropriate and meaningful engagement between trusted community stakeholders (participants, patients, caregivers, patient advocacy organizations and leaders) and researchers (clinical trial sponsors, investigators, clinical research sites) can help effectively address the perspectives and priorities that are important for patients — those who will be impacted by the research.

In order to gain insights about what matters to patients and their communities, we engage with patients and their advocates through activities such as patient advisory panels and expert input consultations. These engagements have been especially helpful for: (1) increasing awareness and education to build trust and increase understanding of the importance and benefits of clinical trials; (2) increasing opportunities for underrepresented groups to participate in clinical trials by removing barriers (i.e., logistics, out-of-pocket costs); and (3) increasing partnerships with minority investigators and others who serve communities of color to help improve the diversity of participants — as well as to better demonstrate the safety and efficacy of new drugs, vaccines, and other therapeutics.

Therefore, building trust between researchers and trusted community stakeholders (faith-based organizations, nonprofit and civic groups, community leaders, patient advocacy groups, community healthcare providers, etc.) is critical for overcoming barriers. Furthermore, while altruism and other factors are important considerations, patients and their families are usually most concerned with obtaining the best treatment. Therefore, ensuring patients understand the importance of their participation is critical. This means ensuring that their health will be closely monitored, and that their health will be improved — as well as improving healthcare access and outcomes for all communities.

In summary, increasing research participant diversity continues to be a challenge for industry, academia and other sponsors. However, during this deeply troubling moment for our nation, the confluence of two major catastrophes — the COVID-19 pandemic and community unrest due to racial injustice and inequalities — has amplified disparities and the impact of health inequities — that have been especially harmful to communities of color.

At Pfizer, safety and science are our top priorities. For more than 170 years, we’ve researched, developed, and manufactured safe and effective medicines to help prevent, treat, and cure devastating diseases. We bring this deep experience to the development of a potential COVID-19 vaccine.

We are moving with unprecedented speed, but we will not compromise our safety standards. We will release a vaccine only after appropriate scientific review of safety and effectiveness and approval or authorization by regulatory authorities.