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Title: Exploring cancer clinical trial participation in the new normal of COVID-19: The patient perspective

Background: The impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) has significantly affected cancer patients seeking to enroll in a clinical trial. The pandemic has led to an unprecedented disruption across the cancer research community pausing trial operations. Data from the National Institute of Health and the National Library of Medicine indicates 988 cancer clinical trials were suspended from March – September 1, 2020, with 60% of institutions enrolling patients at a lower rate. Our research underscores the patient perspective of clinical trial participation amid COVID-19.

Methods: July – September 2020 Nationwide eight-week online survey and interviews. Research goals: gain a better understanding of barriers and cultural attitudes of ethnically diverse communities regarding trial participation; learn the enhanced safety measures needed for patients to feel comfortable returning to the clinic; better understand the importance of effective patient-clinician communication.

Results: 511 patient participants reported the following insights: 86% reported their healthcare team had not discussed trial participation; 99% reported being comfortable with telehealth visits for pre-screening and monitoring; 82% receive care at community-based hospitals. Barriers to enrollment and additional safety considerations include gaps in outreach and education services for ethnically diverse communities; absence of cultural sensitivity and disregard of historical perspective; financial insecurity and travel; and the need for increased COVID-19 testing, enhanced safety protocols and a proven vaccine. Participants identified their ethnicity as 38% Caucasian; 24% Black/African American; 19% Hispanic/Latino; 16% Asian; 2% Native American/Pacific Islander

Conclusions: Clinical trials provide patients access to the newest treatments, and yet only 2%-3% of adult cancer patients enroll in a trial. Common barriers to trial participation have been widely researched, but now amongst the coronavirus pandemic, additional barriers are evident. Based on our research, our call to action is clear: work with key opinion leaders in ethnically diverse populations to help build trust and mutual respect when discussing research studies; and engage patients and clinicians to openly discuss clinical trial enrollment working toward patient-centered communication. The coronavirus pandemic is a devastating public health threat, and it will take a collective effort from the entire cancer community to minimize the effect of COVID-19 on cancer clinical trial participation.