Clinical Trials Need More Ethnic Balance

The message to achieve ethnically balanced clinical trials resonated urgently throughout the recent 6th Biennial Symposium on Minorities, the Medically Underserved, and Cancer. Otis Brawley, M.D., director of the National Cancer Institute’s Office of Special Populations, told workshop participants that “minority inclusion in clinical trials is desirable for scientific, ethical, and social reasons.”

Brawley said that 97% of all Americans with cancer are not included in clinical trials, but that “there are social factors beyond the purview of the NCI that hamper minority inclusion in clinical trials. It is important that all Americans have equal access to NCI-sponsored research,” he added.

Best Option

“Clinical trials are seen as the best option for people wanting new therapy,” said Paul Bunn, M.D., director of the University of Colorado Cancer Center, Denver. Bunn added that there are barriers to joining clinical trials for minorities that are not ethnically based, including socioeconomic, logistics, and a misunderstanding of the scientific community.

The workshop also dispelled any misconceptions that the disproportionate incidence of cancer among minorities is due to race. This year alone, 136,000 African-Americans are expected to be diagnosed with cancer. There are also disturbing statistics that reveal high rates of prostate cancer among African-American men, high rates of liver cancer among Southeast Asians, and high rates of colorectal and kidney cancer among Native Americans.

“Race likely has little to do with genetic susceptibility to cancer,” Brawley explained.

“Disparities in cancer rates between minority and white populations cannot be explained away by genetic differences,” added NCI Director Richard Klausner, M.D. “We are all genetically more alike than different,” Klausner said. “While research has linked cancer to genetics, that is just one piece of the puzzle.”

He said it is unlikely that genetics is the major factor in this uneven burden and that cancer may strike along racial lines because of environmental, occupational, or economic factors.

The cancer community needs to gather good data to document the burden of disease and assume the responsibility to reach everyone with cancer information. Klausner said, “The tragedy is not our inability to do the impossible, but is when a group or society fails to do the possible.”

— Karen Hardy

NCI Scholars Program Established

The National Cancer Institute announced the establishment of a new career development program, the NCI Scholars Program, that aims to provide outstanding new investigators with their first independent research programs.

NCI Scholars will be affiliated with an NCI intramural laboratory or branch, and will be provided with research facilities, an operating budget, salary, and personnel for up to 4 years. Successful participants will then be eligible for salary and research support for up to an additional 2 years at an extramural institution through a non-competing award.

Scientists with no more than 5 years of postdoctoral research training in basic, clinical, or population-based biomedical research, and who have demonstrated outstanding scientific abilities are eligible to apply. (Clinical training will not count against the 5 years.) Applicants must be U.S. citizens or resident aliens eligible for citizenship.

The program will be available on a periodic (usually annual) basis; approximately 10 awards will be made in the first year, for which applications are due July 30. Applications will be prioritized based on evaluation of scientific and technical merit by an NCI Study Section and programmatic review by the National Cancer Advisory Board. A committee of senior NCI scientists and representatives of the sponsoring laboratories and branches will invite the strongest candidates to the NCI campus for seminars and interviews. Then, candidates and laboratories/branches will independently generate prioritized lists of their selections. Starting with the top of the applicant list, best matches will be made.

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