

COVID-19 vaccine trials: 1 million more volunteers still needed

NOV 9, 2020

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Almost half a million Americans have signed up to participate in COVID-19 vaccine clinical trials, but in order for the trials to be completed, researchers still need more than 1 million additional people to volunteer.

That was the message James Kublin, MD, MPH, executive director of the COVID-19 Prevention Network (CoVPN), shared during a recent episode of “AMA COVID-19 Update.” Dr. Kublin, who is a principal staff scientist in the vaccine and infectious disease division at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle, spoke with AMA Chief Experience Officer Todd Unger about the goal of CoVPN, the challenges of addressing misinformation and the importance of having a diverse collection of participants in vaccine trials.

CoVPN was started earlier this year by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) to focus on phase 3 efficacy trials for COVID-19 vaccines and monoclonal antibodies. NIAID is part of the National Institutes of Health.

“Vaccine hesitancy continues to be a major issue,” Dr. Kublin said. “Addressing the fears and the uncertainty that people are facing today has been a major focus of our community engagement and outreach efforts.”

Learning from the past

Although CoVPN is new, it is built on the foundation of vaccine networks that conduct clinical trials around the world and that have been supported by NIAID for decades, including the HIV Vaccine Trials Network.

“We’ve learned very much about how to optimize manufacturing, how to test ... most efficiently in humans, what type of safety signals we may have to look out for,” Dr. Kublin said. “That is truly foundational work that goes back over decades that has provided real support to how we can

accelerate these efforts today.”

While processes and findings from these preexisting networks are important, so too is the recognition of how the public views these trials.

“We have to speak directly to the uncertainty that people are feeling and how vaccines and improved therapies and prevention will address that uncertainty, address the fears,” Dr. Kublin said. “We have to speak to the mistrust that exists historically in many of these populations.”

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Dr. Kublin explained that CoVPN looks to physicians, as well as faith-based leaders and community leaders to help educate these and other communities about the vaccine trial process and ways to get involved. Learn more about how doctors can diversity the volunteer pool for COVID-19 vaccine clinical trials.

Seeking more volunteers

The best way for people to learn more about the clinical vaccine trials is to visit the CoVPN website, Dr. Kublin said. The website features information about each of the clinical studies as well as a robust list of frequently asked questions and facts.

The website also makes it easy for volunteers to sign up for a trial, a process Dr. Kublin said takes about five minutes to complete. Signing up to volunteer does not guarantee a spot in any of the trials.

“It doesn’t obligate you to participate in a clinical trial,” he said. “Our clinical trial sites ... reach out to individuals they deem to be best eligible for these particular clinical trials.

“Expressing that interest is a fantastic first step.”