

Diversifying the Ranks of Cancer Researchers

Helps Reduce Cancer Disparities

By the National Cancer Institute

Somewhere in a research laboratory, an African American woman with a medical degree is helping to solve the mysteries of breast cancer. She is working with colleagues to find out why young African American women are disproportionately affected by triple-negative breast cancer, an aggressive and often deadly form of the disease. In another laboratory, an African American man who is an expert on prostate cancer is examining results from a new test that may one day help explain the disparity in which black men are more likely to develop and die from prostate cancer than any other racial or ethnic group in the United States.

As the research community invests more resources into investigating cancer and other health disparities, improving diversity in the research ranks is critical. Underrepresented researchers bring more to the table than education and training credentials. Researchers from underserved communities can help educate and interest patients from their respective

communities in cancer clinical trials because they are trusted by patients in those communities. They can also provide cultural insight that other researchers may not have. For example, an African American cancer researcher is more likely to understand the “fear” some African American men have of regularly visiting the doctor or understand that, in many African American households, the woman is the medical “gatekeeper.”

Yet, the shortage of underrepresented investigators in biomedical research labs is pronounced. Between 2000 and 2008, African Americans earned just 1,900 of the 82,000 doctoral degrees in biology, chemistry, and physics awarded by U.S. institutions, according to the National Science Foundation.

The National Cancer Institute is opening doors for African Americans and others from underserved communities to join the cancer research enterprise. Through two key programs, NCI aims to encourage more researchers from underserved communities to join the field and prepare underrepresented scientists for the rigors of a research

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career.

The Continuing Umbrella of Research Experiences program provides training and career development opportunities to researchers as young as high school students all the way up to junior investigators. The program helps researchers enhance their skills and opportunities through formal networking and mentoring, and it provides a range of funding opportunities for CURE participants.

NCI’s Partnership to Advance Cancer Health Equity (PACHE) program offers intensive training opportunities for participants by fostering partnerships between NCI-designated cancer centers and academic institutions that provide services to racially and ethnically diverse or underserved communities. The PACHE program has a total of 17 partnership sites.

Both CURE and PACHE are run by the NCI Center to Reduce Cancer Health Disparities. The center was created in 2001 to reduce the unequal burden of cancer in our society and train the next generation of

competitive researchers in cancer and cancer health disparities research.

The commitment to enhance diversity in biomedical research also extends to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), NCI’s parent agency. NIH is working to increase the ranks of researchers from underserved communities and to enhance opportunities for more researchers of color to obtain research funding through a formal Working Group on Diversity in the Biomedical Research Workforce. The group presented a plan of action in August 2011 that called for investing more than \$500 million in programs over the next decade to encourage more underrepresented individuals to become biomedical scientists.

For more information about cancer, please visit the NCI web site at www.cancer.gov or call NCI’s Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237). More articles and videos in the culturally relevant Lifelines series are available at www.cancer.gov/lifelines.

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