2024 Cancer Health 25: People Who Power Clinical Trials

This year's Cancer Health 25 spotlights the power and the promise of clinical trials.

June 10, 2024 By Cancer Health Staff

Clinical trials play a vital role in many aspects of our fight against cancer. Not only do they help test cutting-edge treatments that could be more effective and better tolerated, but they also help experts develop new methods of prevention, screening, diagnosis and care. Trials can even lead to improved communication models, medical devices and much more.

Clinical trials can also give participants access to experimental therapies. Regardless of a trial's outcome, the research contributes to the knowledge necessary to extend lifespan, enhance quality of life and, yes, cure cancer.

"Cancer clinical research is a true partnership between those with cancer and those who study and treat cancer," notes Joseph Unger, PhD, MS, a health services researcher and biostatistician at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center. Unger led a recent study assessing research participation that found that one in five people with cancer took part in some form of clinical research and that their enrollment in cancer treatment trials was notably higher (7.1%) than earlier estimates (2% to 3%).

For our fifth annual Cancer Health 25 feature, we want to spotlight the power and the promise of clinical trials. To be clear, this is not a list of the most important clinical trials. Rather it highlights the talent, brains and bravery that come together in the wide-ranging, complex world of these studies. Similarly, we are not ranking "the best" or creating a definitive list, which would be impossible; instead, we're spotlighting some of the amazing accomplishments taking place every day.

If you're seeking information about specific clinical trials, visit ClinicalTrials.gov or myTRIAList.org—which you'll read about in the following pages. You can also inquire about trials through organizations specializing in your type of cancer; many offer online databases and have informed staff members you can contact.

As you read our 2024 Cancer Health 25 list, you will, of course, meet several scientists and principal investigators. To shake it up, in a few of the entries we also include co-leaders and teams, illustrating that this work isn't accomplished solo. You'll also be introduced to academic researchers, educators, advocates for the underserved, statisticians, lawyers, oncology nurses,

patient navigators, a national politician and—last but never least—people living with cancer who participate in clinical trials.

It is an honor to amplify these individuals and their accomplishments. We're sure you'll be inspired.

Garnet Anderson, Ruth Etzioni, Ziding Feng, Katherine Guthrie, Charles Kooperberg and Scott Ramsey(Anderson, Etzioni, Feng, Guthrie, Kooperberg and Ramsey) Courtesy of Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center; Others: Courtesy of Subjects

Garnet Anderson, Ruth Etzioni, Ziding Feng, Katherine Guthrie, Charles Kooperberg and Scott Ramsey

Seattle, Washington

Earlier this year, the National Cancer Institute, part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH),

launched the Cancer Screening Research Network (CSRN), a clinical trials network that tests new technologies for detecting cancer and determines how best to use them. For example: Trials could evaluate the benefits and harms of blood tests that can screen for multiple cancers; though several such tests are already available, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has not yet authorized any. In fact, the CSRN's pilot research project—the Vanguard Study—will help determine what a full-scale trial of these blood tests might entail, including recruitment, guidelines and follow-up of positive tests. The clinical trials network supports the Biden-Harris administration's Cancer Moonshot, an initiative to boost research, cut the cancer death rate in half and, as Biden put it, "end cancer as we know it." CSRN research is based out of eight different sites, with the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center in Seattle serving as a coordinating hub. Helming the efforts there are Garnet Anderson, PhD; Ruth Etzioni, PhD; and Scott Ramsey, MD, PhD. They are joined by statistical and data management team leaders: Ziding Feng, PhD; Katherine Guthrie, PhD; and Charles Kooperberg, PhD.

Vinod P. BalachandranCourtesy of Memorial Sloan Kettering

Vinod P. Balachandran

New York, New York

A surgeon scientist at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, Vinod P. Balachandran, MD, leads a team conducting pioneering work that has the potential to transform the treatment of pancreatic cancer and provide proof of the therapeutic value of future cancer vaccines. Early results from his research showed that personalized mRNA vaccines could trigger an effective and lasting immune response to pancreatic cancer and prevent some patients from relapsing. Customized vaccines are also being studied for other types of cancer, including colorectal cancer and melanoma.

Marisa BittoniCourtesy of Marisa Bittoni

Marisa Bittoni

Columbus, Ohio

A research assistant professor at Ohio State University Comprehensive Cancer Center, Marisa A. Bittoni, PhD, MS, studies the effects of lifestyle risk factors—including diet, exercise and smoking—on lung cancer prevention and survival. She's interested in the effects of inflammatory biomarkers, such as CRP and IL-6, on lung cancer risk as well as the interrelationships with the microbiome—the bacteria, fungi and other microbes that naturally live in the body. Her BEFIT study is exploring whether exercise programs may lower the risk of developing lung cancer by reducing inflammation and changing the microbiome. This research earned her a Lung Cancer Discovery Award from the American Lung Association.

Kelly BoltonCourtesy of Kelly Bolton

Kelly Bolton

St. Louis, Missouri

To help prevent blood cancers, Kelly Bolton, MD, PhD, an oncologist and epidemiologist at the University of Washington Medical School, is leading clinical trials for people who have genetic mutations in the stem cells that give rise to low blood counts. These individuals are at very high risk of developing blood cancers years or even decades later. In the trial, they're treated with targeted therapies specific to their mutations. The trials, which receive support from the Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation, are decentralized, with medications shipped to local doctors, which lowers the costs for patients and reduces the need for expensive travel. As new targeted therapies are developed, opportunities to prevent more blood cancers may arise.

Renee BotelloCourtesy of GO2 for Lung Cancer

Renee Botello

Beaverton, Oregon

As a treatment and clinical trial navigator for the LungMATCH team at GO2 for Lung Cancer, Renee Botello, MSc, offers on-demand concierge-style service customized to meet each patient or caregiver's needs. She also clarifies any options or questions regarding next steps in treatment, including biomarker test results and appropriate clinical trials. She's also responsible for Nuestra Gente, a health education initiative at GO2 that provides culturally relevant information about lung cancer for Latino communities in the United States. "As a native Spanish speaker," she says, "I am proud to expand Spanish support for lung cancer patients. These materials will be a step toward improving equitable access to care for Hispanic/Latinx patients."

Priscilla K. BrastianosCourtesy of Priscilla K. Brastianos

Priscilla K. Brastianos

Boston, Massachusetts

As director of the Central Nervous System Metastasis Center at Massachusetts General Hospital, Priscilla K. Brastianos, MD, leads research exploring the changes in DNA sequences that drive brain tumors. Scientific findings from clinical trials she conducted show that targeted therapy drugs may provide effective alternatives to high-risk surgery and radiation therapy as a treatment for craniopharyngiomas—rare, recurrent brain tumors. She is also investigating innovative precision medicine approaches that are showing promising results in patients with meningiomas and metastatic brain tumors.

Keith CrawfordCourtesy of PHEN

Keith Crawford

Quincy, Massachusetts

Black men develop and die of prostate cancer at a higher rate than white men. The Prostate Health Education Network (PHEN) aims to eliminate this disease in Black communities, and its PHENTrials initiative works to increase awareness of and participation in research. Spearheading that effort is Keith Crawford, MD, PhD, the director of clinical trials and patient education at PHEN. A graduate of Harvard University (he studied immunology, genomics and more) and a former researcher at Brigham and Women's Hospital, Crawford recently teamed up with Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center to present an educational webinar about how to make clinical trials work for Black men with prostate cancer.

Anthony El-Khoueiry and Chanita Hughes-Halbert(El-Khoueiry and Hughes-Halbert) Courtesy of KEck Medicine of USC

Anthony El-Khoueiry and Chanita Hughes-Halbert

Los Angeles, California

To engage underserved and minority populations in Phase I and II clinical trials, the national nonprofit Stand Up To Cancer (SU2C) launched the Diversity in Early Development Clinical Trials Research Grants Program last year. The program supports teams in Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles and Philadelphia tasked with the goal of helping minority groups access clinical trials. Heading efforts in Los Angeles are Anthony El-Khoueiry, MD, an associate professor of clinical medicine who specializes in gastrointestinal malignancies and liver cancer, and Chanita Hughes-Halbert, PhD, an associate director for cancer equity who focuses on reducing disparities, including those linked to racial, genetic, socioeconomic and environmental factors. Based at the University of Southern California's Keck School of Medicine, the research team will examine existing structures to identify areas that can be improved.

Toni EnglishCourtsy of Toni English

Toni English

Rockledge, Florida

After experiencing frequent nosebleeds, Toni English was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer—mucosal melanoma in her nostril—and given six months to live. That was in 2015. Despite surgery and treatments, the cancer spread to her brain, lungs and right kidney. Then English joined a clinical trial testing tumor-infiltrating lymphocyte (TIL) therapy. Not only did it work for her, but the trial also led the FDA to approve the first TIL therapy earlier this year (go here to learn more about this novel treatment). Today, English educates and supports others through Facebook and the Mucosal Melanoma Warriors Foundation. “Ever since my time as a trial participant,” she recently told the Melanoma Research Alliance, “I have become an advocate for more awareness around clinical trials for rare cancers.”

Ricki FairleyCourtesy of TouchBBCA.org

Ricki Fairley

Annapolis, Maryland

After surviving metastatic triple-negative breast cancer, Ricki Fairley cofounded Touch, The Black Breast Cancer Alliance, of which she is also the CEO. Touch educates and advocates via such events and programs as When We Tri(al) and the weekly web series The Doctor Is In. To mobilize the Black community to participate in clinical trials, she helped launch #BlackDataMattters (#BDM), an initiative that operates in partnership with Morehouse School of Medicine, Ciitizen and others. Treatments haven’t been extensively tested in Black women, notes TouchBBCA.org, which explains that “until we have more Black women included in research, we cannot put an end to the disparities that Black women diagnosed with breast cancer face.”

Kerri GoberCourtesy of Kerri Gober

Kerri Gober

Atlanta, Georgia

As associate chief of staff for the discovery and research department at American Cancer Society (ACS), Kerri Gober connects teams and ensures flawless execution of key initiatives to advance ACS's mission. Her guidance for research efforts includes several programs focused on health equity and diversity, such as those boosting enrollment of Black men in prostate cancer clinical trials and increasing the pipeline of diverse oncology researchers. She's an ambassador for VOICES of Black Women, an initiative to engage 100,000 Black women in a longitudinal study focused on cancer risk and outcomes. A fierce community advocate, Gober is also involved with several groups focused on health, educational and economic equity.

Amanda GoodstadtCourtesy of Amanda Goodstadt

Amanda Goodstadt

Chicago, Illinois

Attorney Amanda Goodstadt knows cancer. Her husband is a lymphoma survivor, her mother is undergoing treatment for breast cancer and she lost a close friend to leukemia six years ago. She also knows that many people need help navigating the legal and financial consequences of a diagnosis and, especially, a clinical trial. While hospitals that sponsor clinical trials cover trial-related care, getting insurance coverage for other routine costs can take skill and effort—for example, getting hospitals to accept out-of-state Medicaid payment is a common issue. As senior staff attorney for the nonprofit Triage Cancer (TriageCancer.org), Goodstadt supports education and provides free one-on-one assistance.

Lisa Hefner and Christine VeriniHefner (Courtesy of Lisa Hefner); (Verini) Courtesy of CancerCare

Lisa Hefner and Christine Verini

New York, New York

Are you searching for a cancer clinical trial to join, or maybe you'd like to hear from former participants? Then check out myTRIAList.org as well as its videos and social media accounts. Launched in October 2023, the initiative helps patients find trials based on location, among other criteria, and offers first-person accounts, doctor interviews, tutorials and more. This vital resource arrives via a partnership spearheaded by Lisa Hefner, group president of Brightly Network Companies (including Blend.Works), and Christine Verini, CEO of CancerCare, a national nonprofit that provides numerous services to people affected by cancer. "We're really excited about this initiative," Verini says. "We are passionate about helping people be a part of clinical trials."

Robin KellyCourtesy of RobinKelly.house.gov

Robin Kelly

Matteson, Illinois

Congressmembers have a role to play in the success of clinical trials. Not only do lawmakers secure funding needed for research, but they can also pass laws ensuring that all Americans can participate in and benefit from medical innovations. One example: In 2022, U.S. Congresswoman Robin Kelly (D–Ill.), chair of the Congressional Black Caucus Health Braintrust, introduced the NIH Clinical Trial Diversity Act to make sure underrepresented communities are included in federal trials. Numerous lawmakers support the legislation. Similar bills include the Diversifying Investigations Via Equitable Research Studies for Everyone (DIVERSE) Act, the Diverse and Equitable Participation in Clinical Trials (DEPICT) Act and the Childhood Cancer Clinical Trials Act.

Salvatore La RosaCourtesy of Salvatore La Rosa

Salvatore La Rosa

New York, New York

As chief scientific officer of the Kidney Cancer Association, Salvatore La Rosa, PhD, brings the voices of cancer patients to every point along the clinical trial pathway—from planning through post-trial feedback—to improve the lives of people with kidney cancer. La Rosa, former chief scientific officer at the Children's Tumor Foundation, is a medicinal chemist with a background in biotech drug discovery and nonprofit leadership. Patient-centered research is especially critical in kidney cancer, which is tough to spot, difficult to treat and includes many rare types that often go undiagnosed. La Rosa also collaborated with investigators to have patient panels provide input on a kidney cancer quality-of-life assessment questionnaire, currently in a clinical trial.

Kelly Laschinger and Leah SzumitaCourtesy of Kelly Laschinger and Leah Szumita

Kelly Laschinger and Leah Szumita

Rye Brook, New York

The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society launched the Clinical Trial Support Center in 2016, with one part-time nurse. Now, director Leah Szumita, MS, RN, and manager Kelly Laschinger, MSN, RN, oversee 12 nurse navigators with expertise in pediatric and adult blood cancers who provide free one-on-one navigation support in English or Spanish. Navigators identify potential clinical trials, answer questions, help overcome barriers to enrollment and provide logistical support. The program is a national model for efforts to increase enrollment in clinical trials, including for underserved populations, at every stage of treatment. In the past five years alone, the center has helped nearly 5,000 blood cancer patients navigate clinical trials.

Kristen LegorCourtesy of Dana-Farbe

Kristen Legor

Boston, Massachusetts

Successful clinical trials and related breakthroughs would not be possible without the essential work of clinical research nurses. These specialized nurses not only ensure quality patient experiences but also organize and execute countless elements of a trial, including protocol reviews and patient education. What’s more, they work with interdisciplinary colleagues to ensure equal access to clinical trials for all populations of cancer patients. As the vice president of clinical research nursing operations and associate chief nurse at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Kristen Legor, PhD, RN, JD, is revolutionizing clinical trial nursing roles and processes. While guaranteeing the care and safety of her team’s oncology patients and the integrity of the research protocol, Legor guides and trains staff to advance the lifesaving potential of clinical trials.

Jessica McDermottCourtesy of Jessica McDermott

Jessica McDermott

Aurora, Colorado

Jessica McDermott, MD, MSCS, is the lead investigator conducting clinical trials at the University of Colorado (CU) Cancer Center and the Rocky Mountain Regional Veterans Affairs Medical Center as well as CU Cancer Center's deputy associate director for diversity and inclusion in clinical research. Her work addresses obstacles that hinder equitable access to clinical trials and helps eliminate barriers to patient retention in such studies. "As a group, we believe all patients should be given the opportunity to participate in clinical trials," McDermott says. "Trials can give patients access to cutting-edge treatments or hope when they no longer have standard options."

Jose Alejandro Rauh-HainCourtesy of Jose Alejandro Rauh-Hain

Jose Alejandro Rauh-Hain

Houston, Texas

In the popular imagination, clinical trials involve lifesaving experimental drugs and high-stakes procedures. Reality isn't always so dramatic. Some cancer trials, for instance, may aim to collect vital data to establish best protocols and screening methods. One example: the IGNITE-TX study, led by Jose Alejandro Rauh-Hain, MD, MPH, a gynecologic oncologist at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center who's originally from Mexico City. The study's goal is to explore ways to increase genetic testing of family members at higher risk for Lynch syndrome (which is associated with colorectal, kidney, pancreatic and stomach cancers) and people with a family history of melanoma, breast, ovarian, prostate and pancreatic cancers (associated with BRCA mutations). Interested participants can enroll online for free and contribute to the growing knowledge base on inherited cancer syndromes and how to prevent and detect them.

Paul ShayCourtesy of Paul Shay

Paul Shay

New York, New York

To properly understand whether the results of clinical trials can apply to a wide swath of people with cancer, trials must enroll diverse populations, not just in terms of gender, race, ethnicity and socioeconomic background but also sexual orientation and identity. While leading the PRIDE Alliance People and Business Resource Group at Bristol Myers Squibb (BMS), Paul Shay was a key player in its decision, announced last year, to include LGBTQ data in all of the company's U.S. clinical trials—making BMS the first pharma to do so. Thanks to Shay, a biopharma executive with strategy and operations experience, BMS also sponsored the National LGBT Cancer Network's groundbreaking Out Cancer Survey.

Sara TolaneyCourtesy of Dana-Farber

Sara Tolaney

Boston, Massachusetts

As a breast cancer researcher, Sara Tolaney, MD, MPH, the chief of the division of breast oncology at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, focuses on developing novel drugs that are less toxic and more effective. Her work includes several cutting-edge therapies—notably a regimen for early stage HER2-positive breast cancer patients—and her contributions to breast cancer research recently earned her the Susan G. Komen Rising Star Researcher Award. Tolaney is also an associate professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School. “It’s an incredible journey,” she told The ASCO Post, “taking a drug from first-in-human studies into the pipeline all the way through registration.”

Daniel R. WahlCourtesy of Daniel R Wahl

Daniel R. Wahl

Ann Arbor, Michigan

A physician scientist and a clinical investigator at the University of Michigan, Daniel R. Wahl, MD, MPH, focuses on creating new treatments for glioblastomas—aggressive, recurring brain tumors that frequently result in poor patient outcomes. He's developing clinical trials to merge standard therapies for glioblastomas with drugs that target the metabolic pathways responsible for resistance to treatment. His research, which receives funding from the Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation, shows that inhibiting abnormal metabolism in glioblastomas might help more people with these cancers live longer. "Our standard approaches to improve survival for patients with glioblastomas have been unsuccessful," he says. "My research team tries to develop new, creative approaches to help patients with this tough disease."

Dann WonserCourtesy of Dann Wonser/Aidan de Renne

Dann Wonser

Portland, Oregon

Dann Wonser, who credits clinical trials with saving his life, shares his self-education in a blog, which is published on Cancer Health, and in his book, Second Wind: Thriving With Cancer. When his Stage III lung cancer, diagnosed and treated in 2006, recurred as Stage IV metastatic cancer in 2011, he was treated with multiple therapies. But when the treatments stopped working in 2014, a clinical trial gave him access to a next-generation targeted therapy, which he stayed on until 2021; he has since been on three more. A patient advocate who lobbies Congress to cover more clinical trial expenses, Wonser empowers people with cancer to access cutting-edge treatments available only in clinical trials.

Timothy YapCourtey of Timothy Yap

Timothy Yap

Houston, Texas

Finding effective cancer drugs with fewer side effects starts with the first time an agent is tested in humans: Phase I clinical trials, which measure side effects, dose and antitumor activity. Timothy Yap, FRCP, PhD, head of clinical development in the Therapeutics Discovery division at MD Anderson Cancer Center, is working to design these early trials better. While the traditional chemotherapy model emphasizes the highest tolerable dose, targeted therapies often work effectively at lower-than-maximum doses. Yap is developing new drugs that can treat many cancers, often in combination, by targeting DNA damage in people with BRCA and related mutations. He is also exploring biomarkers that could predict which patients will benefit from new therapies.

Heather YeoCourtesy of Heather Yeo

Heather Yeo

New York, New York

Close monitoring of people with colorectal cancer after surgery can reduce complications that can land them back in the hospital. To make that happen, Heather Yeo, MD, a surgical oncologist at NewYork-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Medical Center, is empowering patients with a smartphone app, mHeals. Now in clinical trials, the app tracks mobility and pain, provides self-care support and allows patients to upload images of their incisions and to report any issues to get help quickly. Such patient-driven apps have the potential to transform patient care. Yeo also conducts research on the promise of immunotherapy to reduce the need for colorectal cancer surgery and is working to increase the representation of women and people of color in the surgical field.