Five Melanoma Research Highlights to Look Forward to in 2021

The Melanoma Research Alliance shares the top five items that has our team excited for the coming year in the fight against melanoma.

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By Marc Hurlbert, PhD, MRA Chief Science Officer

Without doubt, much will be written about 2020 in the years to come - from the news headlines of COVID-19 and the US elections, to melanoma specific achievements such as exciting clinical trials results and our own efforts to fuel a revolution in research. Today, however, we choose to look forward to the near horizon and to share the top five items that has our team excited for the coming year in the fight against melanoma:

#1: New Research Ideas and Grants to Fund

All of us at MRA are excited for the review and selection of new research to fund from a record crop of applications. As many already know, clinical trials and research labs were temporarily slowed due to COVID-19. Most scientists, however, took the time to analyze previously collected data, review the literature in their areas of research, and develop new ideas and hypotheses to test. The pandemic provided time for reflection and thinking by scientists about how best to tackle some of the most challenging questions in melanoma – such as how to help the half of patients that do not currently respond to available treatments? Why does resistance to treatment develop? How do we best treat patients with rare melanoma subtypes (acral, mucosal, uveal, pediatric/adolescent disease)? And how do we advance early detection, diagnosis and prevention research?

The time for reflection in 2020, has enabled – in part – a record number of new proposals and ideas submitted to MRA for our 2020-21 Request for Proposals. We've received hundreds of proposals across our award mechanisms – including our recently re-launched Investigator Academic-Industry Partnership (AIP) Award. A mechanism designed to enhance translational research by fostering partnership across academic and industry research sectors.

MRA's esteemed Grant Review Committee (GRC) members are working hard over these winter days to review the proposals in advance of full-panel peer reviews in February. The MRA Board will meet in March to review the final slate with an intent to issue at least $9-million in new awards by May.

#2: RARE, a Registry for Patients with Acral and Mucosal melanoma

In 2021, MRA will launch RARE, a prospective registry for patients with acral and mucosal melanoma. RARE will be a free, interactive App (iOS and Android) and web platform where patients can share information on their experiences with these two rare melanomas, including their diagnosis journey, disease history and treatment. Gathering data from hundreds to thousands of melanoma patients will help advance research on these rare melanoma subtypes.

Funding and advancing research all of the rare melanoma subtypes (acral, mucosal and uveal) has been a priority for MRA since our founding. To date, we've awarded 22 grants totaling $10.3 million to conduct research on these rare subtypes; which can be found through searches of the publicly available MRA Grant Database. These projects have identified unique genomic features in acral, mucosal, and uveal melanoma and uncovered similarities and differences to non-acral cutaneous disease. What's next is studying a larger cohort of patients with acral and mucosal melanomas and following them over time, to better understand the natural history of disease, responses to treatment, and opportunities for further advancing the research.

MRA is building RARE in partnership with a dozen patient, caregiver, and advocate advisors, as well as an impressive group of physicians and researchers from leading cancer centers. Because acral and mucosal melanoma are so rare (only 2,000 cases each in the US each year), few patients are treated at any single location. Thus, MRA launching RARE and directly recruiting patients from across the country – and later worldwide – will enable a broader net of patients to join. The data provided by patients who consent and join the RARE registry will be de-identified, and aggregate data will be available to researchers at any academic center in real time to analyze and study.

#3: Broadening Investments in Dermatology, Prevention, and Early Detection

In 2019, MRA launched a new pilot program – the Dermatology Fellows Award, as a part of our broader efforts to further engage dermatologists in advancing melanoma prevention and detection. The initial projects included research in 'tele-health' visits, artificial intelligence (AI), and the study of novel biomarkers to help in melanoma detection, diagnosis, and prognosis. These research projects have the potential to improve patient access to expert dermatologists, and improve early detection and treatment.

First piloted in 2019, the program issued nine awards across seven different institutions. With the success of the pilot, MRA expanded the eligibility in 2020 to broaden the pool of applicants, allowing dermatology fellows from any academic U.S. research institution with an established pigmented lesion clinic or program in a Department or Division of Dermatology.

After careful review of 2020 proposals by the MRA Dermatology Council, 13 awards were issued, including five to new institutions.

The 2021 MRA Dermatology Fellows RFP will be released in February and again, MRA hopes to expand the program to reach even more institutions, as well to encourage proposals that address the challenges in dermatology related to darker skin color and sun-safety for school aged

children. People of color are diagnosed with melanoma less often, however they are up to four times more likely to be diagnosed with advanced melanoma and up to 1.5 times more likely to die of the disease. To further address these issues, the 2021 Dermatology Fellows program will encourage proposals that focus on prevention, education, risk-reduction, and diagnosis of melanoma in black/African American, Hispanic, Asian, and other populations with darker skin tones.

Equally exciting, MRA is thrilled for a new partnership with SuperGoop in the Dermatology Fellowship program as we seek to engage investigators with a priority focus on school-aged children and sun safety.

#4: 2021 MRA Scientific Retreat

MRA's Scientific Retreat has become one of the top gatherings of academic researchers, pharmaceutical and biotech representatives, government officials, philanthropists, and patient advocates across the global melanoma research community. Historically, due to physical space constraints, the annual in-person gathering is capped at 300 participants. For 2021, MRA has moved the Retreat to a virtual format and doubled the participation cap to 600. The Retreat will be held at varying times over three days in order to enable participation of researchers from all time zones across the globe.

MRA's 2021 Scientific Retreat will take place February 22-24 and the agenda is available on the MRA website. The Retreat will include many current grantees sharing and presenting their latest research findings ('unpublished data') through 12 lectures, including 3 keynote lectures, and panel discussions. MRA aims to recreate the congenial and collaborative spirit found at the in-person event through moderated Q&A with the speakers, two poster sessions, and two breakout sessions each with more than 20 networking roundtables on topics of interest submitted by past and registered participants.

#5 Reimagining Melanoma Research

While number five on the list – top of mind in our daily work is the concept of reimagining how biomedical research is conducted. After the challenges of COVID-19 and the impact on the research pipeline, the opportunity for 'building back melanoma research better' during and after the pandemic is a once in a life-time chance.

The COVID-19 pandemic showed us the possibilities to rapidly advance science and research through open collaboration; sharing of data, information, and resources across academic institutions, governments and pharmaceutical companies. The open and collaborative response to coronavirus by scientists across these sectors resulted in the rapid development and approvals of COVID-19 treatments and vaccines. Treatments and vaccines were developed in record time because of these multi-sector collaborations and sharing of data and publishing quickly in open-access journals, with each team of researchers rapidly learning from and building upon the work done by others. Clinical trials were launched and enrolled at record speed, efforts to decentralize and bring trials to patients were needed, tested and proven, and regulatory bodies across the globe conducted regulatory review at record pace while maintaining transparency and rigorous

medical standards.

At MRA, every day we are focused on how melanoma research can be reimagined to accelerate progress similar to what has been accomplished in record time with COVID-19 research, and look forward to a future not only void of COVID-19; but where suffering and death due to melanoma are no more.

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