NIH and VA Collaborate to Boost Veterans' Access to Cancer Clinical Trials

"This will not only help our veterans, but also advance cancer care for all Americans, and people around the world."

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Veterans with cancer who receive treatment from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) will now have easier access to clinical trials of novel cancer treatments, thanks to an agreement between VA and the National Cancer Institute (NCI), part of the National Institutes of Health.

The NCI and VA Interagency Group to Accelerate Trials Enrollment, or NAVIGATE, which is launching at 12 VA facilities across the country, will enhance the ability of veterans to participate in trials carried out through NCI's National Clinical Trials Network (NCTN) and the NCI Community Oncology Research Program (NCORP). As part of the agreement, NCI will provide infrastructure funding support needed for the VA facilities to participate in NCI-sponsored trials, enhancing the ability of veterans with cancer to receive promising treatments locally. In turn, VA will manage organizational and operational activities within its national healthcare system to establish a network to focus on NCI trial goals.

"NAVIGATE is an opportunity for VA and NCI to partner at the national level to make clinical trials more accessible to veterans," said James H. Doroshow, MD, deputy director for Clinical and Translational Research, NCI. "This agreement will not only provide veterans greater access to NCI clinical trials, it will enhance accrual to NCTN and NCORP trials, resulting in more timely completion of these studies. This interagency collaboration will also work to help veterans overcome barriers they've faced trying to access clinical trials as part of their cancer care."

VA has a robust clinical research program that includes clinical trials in cancer and other diseases at approximately 100 sites nationwide. However, VA facilities often face challenges initiating and completing externally funded trials because of the need for partners to navigate the system. This program aims to overcome these challenges with dedicated staffing and a sustainable infrastructure, and to address existing barriers to trial enrollment that veterans, including minority patients, often experience. In addition, NAVIGATE will increase the participation of VA investigators in clinical cancer research, and provide opportunities for these researchers to identify studies that may be of particular importance to veterans with cancer.

After an application process, the 12 VA sites picked to participate in NAVIGATE are: Atlanta VA Health Care System; James J. Peters VA Medical Center in New York City; Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center in Charleston, South Carolina; VA Eastern Colorado Health Care System in Denver; Durham VA Medical Center in North Carolina; Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital in Hines, Illinois; Tibor Rubin VA Medical Center in Long Beach, California; Minneapolis VA Health Care System; VA Palo Alto Health Care System in California; Portland VA Medical Center in Portland, Oregon; Audie L. Murphy VA Hospital/South Texas Veterans Health Care System in San Antonio; and VA Connecticut Healthcare System in West Haven.

The program will be jointly managed by VA and NCI for up to three years. It is expected that, during this time, the participating VA sites will establish long-term capabilities to continue participation in NCI trials after this program ends. The NAVIGATE program sites will also establish best practices and share insights to help VA sites nationwide to initiate new studies and enroll more veterans in cancer clinical trials.

“By increasing enrollment in cancer clinical trials, VA and veterans will be contributing to important oncology research,” said VA Chief Research and Development Officer Rachel Ramoni, DMD, ScD. “This will not only help our veterans, but also advance cancer care for all Americans, and people around the world.”

VA’s involvement in NAVIGATE is being managed through the Cooperative Studies Program, part of VA’s Office of Research and Development. NAVIGATE is overseen by an Executive Committee comprised of VA and NCI leadership responsible for ensuring effective coordination on key activities between the agencies and that program milestones are achieved.

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