# Reporter’s Notebook: Cancer Researchers Take On Racism, COVID-19

The American Association for Cancer Research Annual Meeting goes virtual.

June 25, 2020 By Liz Highleyman

In keeping with the times, the coronavirus pandemic and racial inequities were key themes this week at the American Association for Cancer Research (AACR) Virtual Annual Meeting II. Originally scheduled for San Diego in April, the conference was recast as a pair of virtual meetings due to the COVID-19 crisis. But the shift didn’t hurt attendance: Nearly 70,000 people tuned in.

Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi at AACR 2020 opening ceremonyScreenshot by Liz Highleyman

Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-San Francisco) welcomed participants at the opening ceremony, speaking of the “systemic injustices” that have led to care and cutting edge medical treatment being denied for “too many Americans for far too long,” particularly communities of color.

She was followed by Sen. Roy Blunt (R-MO), a two-time cancer survivor and a champion of medical research funding. He noted that previous investments in research infrastructure have been critical in supporting rapid gains in knowledge about COVID-19. But the National Cancer Institute (NCI), in particular, receives far more grant applications than it can fund. “We don’t want to miss out on the next Jim Allison or the next Carl June,” Blunt said.

Jim Allison, PhD, of MD Anderson Cancer Center, played a key role in the discovery of checkpoint inhibitor immunotherapy, while Carl June, MD, of the University of Pennsylvania’s Abramson Cancer Center—a member of Cancer Health’s advisory board—is a CAR-T therapy pioneer.

Another immunotherapy pioneer, the NCI’s Steven Rosenberg, MD, PhD, gave an award lecture that described the evolution of tumor-infiltrating lymphocytes (TILs) and T cell receptor (TCR) gene therapy. He showed the results from one of his star patients, Melinda Bachini, who received TIL therapy for cholangiocarcinoma, is alive and well and is one of our inaugural Cancer Health 25 Change Makers.

> Ned Sharpless @NCIDirector: #COVID19 disruption of cancer care -- delayed diagnosis, deferred & nonstandard care -- could lead to ~10,000 excess deaths from breast & colon cancer care, with impact felt for at least a decade @AACR @theNCI #AACR20 #coronavirus pic.twitter.com/XApeuDkgcJ
>
> — Liz Highleyman (@LizCancerHealth) June 23, 2020

On the COVID-19 front, NCI director Ned Sharpless, MD, spoke about how the pandemic has disrupted cancer care, leading to reduced screening, delayed diagnosis, deferred care and in some cases reduced or nonstandard care. As described in his recent editorial in Science, Sharpless estimates that this could lead to almost 10,000 extra deaths from breast and colorectal cancer alone over the next decade.

NIH director Francis Collins, MD, PhD, also spoke about COVID-19 and cancer, but his talk took place early morning California time, so I’ll have to catch it on replay.

Amelie Ramirez, DrPh, MPH, of the University of Texas Health Science Center and director of Salud America!—another Cancer Health 25 Change Maker—gave a great overview of COVID-19 among Latinos. Real Health, our sister publication focused on Black health, has covered the

disproportionate impact of the coronavirus on African Americans, but Latino communities are also heavily affected.

Amelie Ramirez of @SaludAmerica: several factors lead to worse impact of #COVID19 on Latinos @AACR #AACR20 #coronavirus pic.twitter.com/7Bld9WTdRv

— Liz Highleyman (@LizCancerHealth) June 23, 2020

For me, Tuesday's discussion on Racism and Racial Inequities in Cancer Research was one of the most essential sessions at the conference. The Black panelists spoke about their own feelings in response to the police killing of George Floyd and the challenges of facing racism in academia and medicine.

"The look on that policeman's face will be forever burned into my brain," said John Carpten, PhD, of the Keck School of Medicine at the University of Southern California. "A lot of events have happened in history, but this one really struck a nerve. No matter what I accomplish in life, the first thing people will see is that I'm Black."

If there is one @AACR #AACR2020 session that every med student, biomed sci, doc, etc needs to watch, it's ?????????????????????? ????????????

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About as candid a talk as there is out right now with

LEADERS talking ACTION. pic.twitter.com/jJ5wXxkxAg

— R.J. Ledet, Ph.D. #The15WhiteCoats (@theguywithyes) June 23, 2020

“We don’t need allies, we need disruptors,” said Russell Ledet, PhD, a medical student at Tulane and a cofounder of The 15 White Coats. “The people being marginalized cannot be the ones who solve the problem.” He urged everyone to speak out—and not just when people of color are present—to make it clear that institutions won’t tolerate racism.

“It’s no longer enough to say you’re not racist—you have to be anti-racist,” Robert Winn, MD, of Virginia Commonwealth University’s Massey Cancer Center, concurred.

The many other interesting topics at the conference included the need for increased diversity in clinical trials, carcinogens in the home and workplace, cancer vaccines, sex differences in the development of cancer and response to treatment, and the role of the microbiome, which is being revealed in a growing number of cancer types. (For background, see "The Microbiome Frontier," a finalist for the 2020 AACR June L. Biedler Prize for Cancer Journalism.)

AACR president Antoni Ribas, MD, of UCLA’s Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center, said that registered attendees can view recordings of conference sessions on the AACR website until September. You can still register and it’s free. And keep an eye on Cancer Health’s AACR conference page for all our reports from the meeting in the coming days.

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