From hesitancy to hope: One physician’s experience with the Moderna trial

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I opened the door to the sound of a gasp that the patient quickly stiffened with both of her hands. Through her tears she declared, “I’ve never had a Black doctor before!” We hugged because in that moment, there were shared experiences that we had as Black women living in America which obviated the need to expend energy explaining those to each other. This became even more important as the mRNA vaccine candidates were approved for emergency use authorization (EUA) and physicians would have to start addressing vaccine hesitancy.

We know that Black patients are twice as likely to trust a messenger of their own racial/ethnic group as compared to a White counterpart. And, we know that 72% of Black and 66% of Latinx Americans trust their healthcare professionals [1]. Those communities are disproportionately affected by COVID-19, specifically 55% of Black and 73% of Latinx Americans know someone who has been diagnosed with the disease and 48% of Black and 52% of Latinx individuals know someone who has been hospitalized with, or died from, COVID. Yet, only 14% of Black Americans say they trust in the vaccine’s safety and 18% its effectiveness. Additionally, at the time of the study, only 28% of Blacks and 47% of Latinx Americans believed that the vaccine would be tested specifically for safety in their racial/ethnic group [1].

Because the long runway to any discussion on vaccines with communities of color is littered with systemic racism and difficult truths about clinical trials, like the Tuskegee Experiment in which black men with syphilis remained untreated even after penicillin was found effective, I knew I would have an uphill battle asking my patients to be vaccinated [2]. It seemed reasonable that my participation in a vaccine trial could provide a credible context in which to have these important discussions.

Fortunately, my institution is one of ninety sites for the Moderna trial, and my step siblings’ raw heartache was laid bare that I was jolted into action. My first task was to convince my husband that the vaccine contained no virus. With a brief explanation about mRNA technology, he was supportive. The first of seven trial visits was three hours: a physical, informed consent, and randomization to placebo or vaccine. Via phone app, enrollees were asked to record any of seventeen symptoms including fatigue, fever, myalgia, arthralgia, and headache. The second dose was expected to be more reactogenic than the first, so when I had a heavy arm for the following twenty-four hours, I suspected I had received more than the normal saline placebo. It wasn’t until the unblinding visit that my suspicion was confirmed – I had received the trial vaccine. That visit was an unexpectedly emotional one since I had been a staunch advocate that our residents and fellows in training at our institution be prioritized to receive vaccines that were in scarce supply.

An interview with the American Medical Association, about my trial participation, was picked up by national print, radio and television which in turn provided platforms to magnify the message of mRNA vaccine efficacy and safety. Speaking in online forums and community town halls, as well with hosts of Black local and national radio stations, has yielded results as evidenced by emails from colleagues whose patients have cited these forums as impactful in their decisions to receive the vaccines. These platforms have provided opportunities to also point out that Moderna investigators paused their study part way through to ensure the enrollment of Black and Latinx participants matched the percentage of us in the general population [3]. I also found it meaningful to point out to Black communities that Dr. Kizzmekia Corbett, a 34 year old black woman, is one of two scientists who led the development of the Moderna vaccine through the National Institutes of Health [4]. She works alongside Dr. Fauci who also has high trust in Black communities [1].

Our family lost three more family members to the SARS-CoV-2 virus before Moderna’s EUA was approved so, to honor them, and to help determine how long immunity with the vaccine will be conferred, my tenure in the study will be the full 25 months.

Declaration of Competing Interest

Dr. Edje has nothing to disclose.
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