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Medical College of Wisconsin: Joins national effort to increase, improve COVID-19 testing among vulnerable communities

Posted on Wednesday, Oct 7, 2020

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Milwaukee, October 7, 2020 – Understanding COVID-19 infection and progression rates and how they vary among individuals is critical to individual and policy responses to the pandemic and planning for future infection outbreaks. The Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW), in partnership with Northwestern University, has joined a national community-engaged research effort led by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to increase availability, accessibility and acceptance of COVID-19 testing, especially among underserved and vulnerable populations.

The MCW project will recruit patients at 12 primary healthcare centers throughout Milwaukee County, and will conduct over 20,000 COVID-19 antibody tests and surveys in 2021. The effort is part of the Rapid Acceleration of Diagnostics (RADx) initiative sponsored by the National Institutes of Health, and is funded through September 2022 as part of the the RADx Underserved Populations (RADx-UP) program, which focuses on vulnerable populations affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The program aims to better understand COVID-19 testing patterns among these communities; strengthen the data on disparities in infection rates, disease progression and outcomes, and develop strategies to reduce these disparities in COVID-19 testing.

The project principal investigators are Reza Shaker, MD, MCW Senior Associate Dean, Associate Provost, Clinical and Translational Research, and Director of the Clinical and Translational Science Institute of Southeast Wisconsin (CTSI); John Meurer, MD, director of the MCW Institute for Health & Equity, and Prof. Bernard Black of Northwestern University, who brings causal inference expertise to the project.

“Our participation in the RADx-UP program will help us measure the percentage of people infected by COVID-19; assess risks for hospitalization, ICU stay and death; develop a web-based risk assessment tool and measure antibody levels after a vaccine is available,” Dr. Meurer said. “The support of our many community partners, with the notable participation of the faith-based community, will allow us to serve a broad array of individuals here in Milwaukee.”

Researchers will conduct the research in vulnerable communities in Milwaukee with the help of the primary care health centers and the CTSI Faith-based Trusted Messenger Network of churches. This effort will link antibody and survey data to healthcare and Medicaid records, COVID-19 viral test results, and create a web-based risk assessment tool that will allow individuals locally and nationally to assess their own COVID-19 risks, if infected.