Black Doctors Create a COVID-19 Vaccine Assessment Task Force

The panel's goal is to ensure that all coronavirus therapeutics approved by the government are safe and effective for African Americans.

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The recent politicization of decisions made by federal health agencies governing COVID-19 drugs and vaccines has served to deepen distrust of the health care system among many Black Americans. For this reason, Black doctors from the National Medical Association (NMA) have organized a task force to vet recommendations made by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), reports STAT.

The NMA was founded in 1895 after Black doctors were excluded from racist professional societies.

Leon McDougle, MD, MPH, president of the NMA and a family physician, stressed that people believe that medical guidance from the CDC and FDA has been tainted. "It's necessary to provide a trusted messenger of vetted information to the African-American community," he observed. "There is a concern that some of the recent decisions by the Food and Drug Administration have been unduly influenced by politicians."

As an example, McDougle cited the FDA's initial backing of hydroxychloroquine to treat COVID-19 despite a lack of evidence and findings that the drug could potentially cause heart damage. The agency eventually walked back its position and revoked authorization of the medication as a treatment for COVID.

The NMA panel seeks to address concerns about COVID-19 vaccines, especially in light of the push to speed their development. Some people worry that a premature rollout of these products means they won't be properly tested and will be unsafe as a result.

African Americans are particularly sensitive to these suspicions, and their distrust of the medical system has kept many from participating in COVID-19 clinical trials.

McDougle hopes the task force might help increase Black people's involvement in such coronavirus studies. But he cautioned that this would happen only if data show that the vaccines are safe and effective.

The new group will also evaluate whether these trials fairly represent the demographic breakdown of the American population as well as how equitable the federal government's plans are for the distribution of a vaccine.

Many experts believe that the panel could potentially either increase immunization rates or further deepen distrust. The key will be whether their findings mirror those of the FDA and CDC.

Whether these medical organizations agree or not, Khadijah Lang, MD, a family physician in Los Angeles and another task force member, said doctors would still provide full transparency and disclosure about their findings and conclusions to patients.

For related coverage, read "More Black People Are Dying of Coronavirus" and "Black Americans Report Worse Effects of Bias From COVID-19."

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