

**U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs
Office of Research and Development
Meeting of the National Research Advisory Council (NRAC)
December 2, 2020**

Minutes

Committee Members

Dr. Geoffrey Ling, Chairman
Dr. Sanjay Doddamani
Dr. Steven Dubinett
Dr. Carrie M. Farmer
Matthew Kuntz, JD
Dr. Jerry S.H. Lee
Dr. James W. Lillard
Dr. Maria F. Lima
Dr. Ross McKinney
Dr. Ronald Poropatich
Dr. Paula Schnurr
Catherine A. Wicklund, MS

Speakers

Dr. Rachel Ramoni
Dr. Mark Roltsch
Dr. Cendrine Robinson

Attendees

Dr. Marisue Cody, DFO
Rashelle Robinson, Alternate DFO

The virtual meeting of the VA's National Research Advisory Council (NRAC) took place on December 2nd, 2020. Designated Federal Officer Marisue Cody opened up the meeting with a couple of announcements about the presentation materials and details on the public comment period. She then invited Dr. Geoffrey Ling, Chairman, to make opening comments.

Chairman Ling, called the meeting to order. He told everyone to stay safe in the current COVID environment and thanked them all for joining today's meeting. He then introduced Dr. Rachel Ramoni for the day's first presentation.

Dr. Ramoni presented on the highlights of what they have accomplished in the area of COVID. One of the things the VA ORD got feedback on handling really well was communication. She said they received feedback from the field that not only was the communication clear, but they were happy and impressed with what the ORD was actually accomplishing with the COVID Response Team, and Dr. Ramoni credited the VA with acting as a complete enterprise rather than as individual teams with these

successes. Another highlight she mentioned was the VA ORD working on its infrastructure and realigning its organization to accommodate and accomplish even more, such as the first biorepository. She then spoke about additional accomplishments such as Operation Warp Speed, the dedicated enrollment sites for Million Veteran Program, and remaining focused on addressing the diversity, equity, and inclusion during COVID amongst others.

She felt the VA was a tremendous asset to the country especially now as it plays a role in bringing other agencies together to collaborate on research and response regarding COVID. Dr. Ramoni last mentioned the VA's attempt to reach a gold standard on analysis and desire to bring people together to work on similar studies and streamlining what they can accomplish as a whole. Some discussion followed and Dr. Ramoni spoke about some items she feels are worth pursuing such as bringing researchers together who are working on similar studies. A few members also spoke about the process of sharing data outside the VA and the drawbacks and advantages of that.

Dr. Ling then introduced the next meeting section which was a discussion on the DEI White Paper that had been reviewed and commented on by a subcommittee. The main points brought up were that the paper as written had done a good job of being concrete in how to put these new plans into operation, but there was some agreement that perhaps it was a bit too specific with no room for flexibility. There was some discussion on how quickly the program could be ramped up, and perhaps hire outside contractors to help get everything set up more quickly. It was also discussed to look at other agencies with already active DEI programs and draw best practices from them since VA has unique access to the public through their health services. The next steps were to finalize the White Paper by next NRAC meeting and to start developing a budget to move the programs forward.

Dr. Robinson and Dr. Roltsch then presented on their work in promoting DEI within the VA ORD. They had received \$1 million to enact their plans and explained they had four main goals. First was to develop a diverse scientific workforce through training and funding opportunities. Second was to stimulate research on minority health and reducing health disparities. Third was to focus on promoting a culture of inclusion in their own workplace. And fourth was to ensure equity is promoted in all scientific activities including their scientific review process. Part of their process is improving the layout of the typical research career through workshops and training supplements for diverse populations to not only promote inclusive hiring but to ensure DEI growth at all seniority levels. They then spoke about some of the specific steps that have already been run as examples of how they are executing these goals, and some future steps they are planning.

A discussion followed that had other NRAC members making suggestions on projects they could try such as connecting students with researchers around the country utilizing digital technology to make that possible. Everyone was very supportive of the DEI work being done and is hopeful to see promising data behind the activities.

After a brief recess, Dr. Poropatich presented on the NRAC Subcommittee White Paper which is about an alternative strategy for VA research. The goal of the presentation is to have the paper reviewed by the NRAC for comments and feedback. The White Paper starts by explaining the main mission of VA research is to develop high quality clinical trials with real world impacts for veterans. It then spoke about strategies for improving this process including the idea of utilizing the triple helix, which involves utilizing industry, academia, and the government collaborations to ensure the best use of resources. They are hoping the White Paper can be successful in getting better funding in FY 22 for accomplishing this work either from congress, or externally from various sources. Part of that funding ask takes IT support into account so researchers can get access to the large amounts of Data Repositories out there that can supplement and inform future research.

Some discussion followed about possible use cases to apply these new strategies to. They also spoke about the use of OTA's. Dr. Poropatich mentioned and understood why the VA can't currently use them, but there are actions being taken to gain access. They also discussed success metrics and felt overall partnerships arranged, and funding brought in would be a good measurement, along with ultimately products and solutions brought to veterans through these strategies.

Dr. Ling started a discussion next on the NRAC annual report. Dr. Cody explained that after reading the report, they will need the members to both evaluate the NRAC in portfolio balance and program management and respond to a survey that asked about how the report was in general and if there are any suggestions to do the report differently next year. There was some discussion and agreement that the report was an excellent way of demonstrating the amount and quality of research that has gone on in the last year throughout the VA made even more impressive by the relatively small budget allocated.

Some critiques were given as well. Mentioned was having more information on the health care and policy impacts all of the research has had, and perhaps including an upfront executive summary that offers highlights of the full report. Some also suggested adding in some challenges the VA is facing and use the report to explain how much more could be accomplished with a larger budget.

Dr. Ling ended the discussion and opened the meeting up for public comment. Dr. Cunningham was the only person who spoke, and he thanked everyone for the DEI discussion and work being done. He felt very close to the issue as a scientist of color and wanted to offer his support for their work.

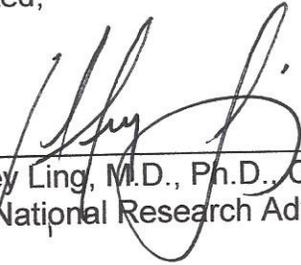
Dr. Cody finished up by informing everyone the next meeting would be March 3rd and follow a similar schedule to this year. Dr. Ramoni then quickly ran through the action items that came out of the meeting. Dr. Ling ended the meeting by telling everyone to stay safe and healthy through the holiday season.

Action items:

- Next meeting will discuss lessons learned, things we should continue doing.
- We want to get the RFI out for diversity, equity, and inclusion in February so that we can make an award in FY-21 and get some students in FY-22. Develop and submit recommendations about DEI to the Secretary.
- Along the lines of alternative strategies, get a couple of concepts together. It sounds like around cancer and around the Scott Hannon Act. Paula and Matt and others volunteered to begin with scoping the response to the Scott Hannon Act.
- Create an executive summary of NRAC report with something punchy for the transition team.

The meeting adjourned at 1:50 p.m.

Submitted,



Geoffrey Ling, M.D., Ph.D., Colonel, US Army (retired)
Chair, National Research Advisory Council