Creative scientists take on recruitment challenge

A late-winter snowstorm couldn't prevent researchers from gathering proposals to improve recruitment strategies.

2017 Creative Scientist Workshop: "Innovations in Recruitment to Clinical Trials," March 14-15, 2017

A group of about 50 biomedical researchers gathered in Buffalo in March to examine the state-of-the-science on recruitment to clinical trials and to explore approaches for developing and evaluating improved methods.

Workshop facilitator Andy Burnett from Knowinnovation Inc. gives directions to working groups.

Participants came from Buffalo Translational Consortium partner institutions and a range of other CTSA hubs and institutions, including the University of Rochester, Vanderbilt University, Johns Hopkins University, University of Pennsylvania, The Ohio State University and Case Western Reserve University.

The need is massive. At present, recruitment of participants represents the single largest obstacle to successful clinical trials. Consensus among this diverse group was reached on at least one topic: the need for more empirical data, rather than guesswork and anecdotes, about what actually does and doesn't work.

Workshop organizer Larry Hawk, PhD, a professor of psychology at UB who conducts clinical trials to help cigarette smokers kick the habit, reviewed the modest literature on evidence-based best practices in recruitment and led the push to improve it: "We need to build a research base for better recruitment as opposed to the usual hand-wringing, throwing money at it, et cetera," he said.

The 2017 Creative Scientist Workshop, "Novel Approaches to Clinical Trials Recruitment," was sponsored by the University at Buffalo Clinical and Translational Science Institute (supported by the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences of the NIH under award number UL1TR001412). It was held over two days, despite a late-winter snowstorm that socked most of

the East Coast, including Buffalo. Attendees heard from national experts on recruitment strategies and formed small work groups to share ideas and formulate strategies.

The conference employed a facilitated workshop format now being used by the National Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health and the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences to catalyze scientific innovation. Workshop attendees brought a diverse set of perspectives to the table, presenting a range of informative case studies and suggested best practices.

Workshop organizer and prolific post-it note writer Larry Hawk gets another idea down on paper.

Speakers at the workshop presented on practical and theoretical issues, including:

Loretta Byrne, RN, MS, CCRP, research services consultant, project manager for ResearchMatch, Vanderbilt University, described coming updates to the ResearchMatch volunteer database platform designed to provide more value for patients who sign up to the service (such as the ability to search for trials and find information about specific diseases, and a forum for their voices to be heard).

Jean Wactawski-Wende, PhD, dean of the University at Buffalo School of Public Health and Health Professions, discussed case studies of successful trials for which she has recruited, stressing the importance of knowing the needs of your participants, ongoing assessment of recruitment strategies, and a willingness to pivot to new strategies when needed.

Brandon M. Welch, PhD, assistant professor in the Biomedical Informatics Center, Department of Public Health Sciences, Medical University of South Carolina, demonstrated a web-based tool, doxy.me, that he developed for telemedicine to allow patients and physicians to come together in a secure online videoconference. Attendees were able to see a mock participant be remotely consented in real-time, a feature that could markedly facilitate recruitment efforts.

Susan M. Czajkowski, PhD, chief of the Health Behaviors Research Branch, Behavioral Research Program, Division of Cancer Control and Population Sciences, National Cancer Institute, NIH, DHHS, unequivocally stated that "recruitment problems are behavioral problems." Czajkowski provided a range of examples to support her contention that the large literature on volunteer behavior, researcher behavior, behavioral economics and persuasion provide a strong foundation for improving recruitment and retention to clinical studies.

Paul A. Harris, PhD, professor in the departments of Biomedical Informatics and Biomedical Engineering, Vanderbilt University, reported on progress in the NCATS Recruitment Innovation Center (RIC) at Vanderbilt University. Harris said the RIC is utilizing the national network of CTSA hubs to coordinate studies on recruitment methods, standardize electronic health records data and share best practices.

Between presentations, facilitator Andy Burnett led groups of participants through consideration of key principles and a range of possible best practices and ideas to evaluate. The importance of building trust between scientists and the community was a major recurring theme during the workshop.

The ideas generated in the workshop are being collated and will be presented on the workshop website, where slides and videos of the talks are already presented. Next steps include further development of collaborative teams around promising ideas into innovative grant proposals.

Interested researchers are invited to join the group by contacting CTSI Research Administrator Erin O'Byrne (erinobyr@buffalo.edu).