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Reflections on the 12th Annual AACI CRI Meeting

By Theresa L. Werner, MD



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Commentary Overview

- The 12th Annual AACI CRI Meeting focused on the unique challenges of conducting cancer clinical trials during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Sessions at the two-day, virtual meeting addressed harnessing technology to improve clinical trials, managing change in clinical trials offices, and effective strategies for working across generational divides.
- Winning abstracts and posters highlighted innovative solutions to operational challenges at AACI cancer centers.

When AACI's Clinical Research Innovation (CRI) Steering Committee convened last fall to plan the 12th Annual AACI CRI Meeting, we mapped out a robust, three-day meeting centered on the future of clinical research. I think it's safe to say that in November, none of us anticipated how quickly our vision for the future would change.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic was declared in March, AACI cancer centers pivoted to create a "new normal." The pandemic has reshaped everyone's lives, affecting everything from the way we work and interact with our colleagues to the way we conduct cancer clinical research.

Recognizing the enormous impact of COVID-19, the steering committee designed an updated agenda for a two-day, virtual meeting that focused on the challenges posed by the pandemic — and the creative, innovative solutions implemented by AACI cancer centers.

Meeting attendees represented 87 cancer centers, corporate roundtable members, sustaining members, and industry. Session topics spanned technology to facilitate remote work, organizational change, and working effectively across multiple generations. The meeting app gave attendees new opportunities to connect in lieu of face-to-face networking, from an

interactive game to a virtual exhibit hall and a live activity feed with photos and social media posts.

It was impressive to see how quickly and effectively AACI cancer centers responded to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Working remotely, clinical trials offices (CTOs) were able to use technology to their advantage to continue essential clinical research and trials for patients. What we have learned from remote work and the use of novel technologies during the pandemic will continue to improve the efficiency of our CTOs.

Change is a constant in the world of clinical research. AACI cancer centers have adapted to change to create a flexible work environment, improve employee satisfaction, and reduce turnover in their CTOs. As we learned from Kimberly Jenkins, MSNM, of Cleveland Clinic Cancer Center, trust is key to achieving these goals — and a must throughout the evolving COVID-19 crisis.

Generational humorist Meagan Johnson embraced the virtual format, conducting video interviews with members of several AACI cancer centers to add a personal touch to her keynote, which addressed the "signposts" that define each generation and impact their work style.

Johnson's keynote provided an informative and entertaining overview of the generations in the workplace. With a broad range of ages represented in our CTOs, it is essential for employees to gain an understanding about how each generation learns from others, and how these interactions will shape future generations. Many participants identified directly with Johnson's points and found her conversations with AACI center members to be a highlight of the presentation.

Henry Ciolino, PhD, director of the NCI's Office of Cancer Centers, presented updates to the NCI Cancer Center Support Grant (CCSG) program, focusing on the P30 Funding Opportunity Announcement. Gisele Sarosy, MD, NCI's associate director for informatics and biomarkers, joined Dr. Ciolino to answer participant questions about community outreach and engagement, including accruing underserved populations to trials.

It is always important for our cancer centers to learn about the latest updates to the CCSG application and hear firsthand from centers who have just completed their visits — especially this year, when site visits have moved to virtual platforms. Carrie Lee, MD, MPH, shared lessons from the first virtual site visit conducted at her institution, UNC Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Dr. Lee described the importance of giving your CTO ample time to plan the virtual site visit, including scripting, rehearsing, and recording presentations; gaining familiarity with technology platforms; and coordinating internal communication during the virtual visit.

Authors from 31 cancer centers submitted 77 abstracts for the annual meeting. The three winning abstracts, selected by the CRI Steering Committee and CRI Education Committee, were submitted by authors representing Cleveland Clinic Cancer Center; University of Hawai'i Cancer Center, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa; and Mays Cancer Center, UT Health San Antonio.

At the CRI annual meeting, we always learn so much from our fellow cancer centers. One of my favorite parts of the meeting is seeing the innovative work being done at our centers to improve operations. Highlights addressed training, minority and community outreach, and trial activation. The virtual meeting allowed AACI to showcase more abstracts in the honorable mention poster session, inspiring attendees to implement new ideas at their centers.

Of course, the CRI annual meeting would not have been possible without corporate support. Exhibitors and other supporters engaged with attendees through the meeting app and presentations that addressed the unique challenges of remote work and provided an overview of the services that vendors can offer to improve CTO operations.

The first virtual CRI annual meeting was an informative, engaging alternative to our in-person meeting. The live Q&A sessions were interactive and loaded with great questions: sometimes even more than we typically receive at the live meeting. If we take away one lesson from the meeting it is how nimble and collaborative AACI cancer centers can be. We can always learn from each other, even when we are apart.

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About AACI Commentary

To promote the work of its members, AACI publishes *Commentary*, a monthly editorial series focusing on major issues of common interest to North American cancer centers, authored by cancer center leaders and subject matter experts.



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