



## Commentary

# Why would a black man volunteer for a government-funded science experiment?

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Early on in the pandemic, I felt helpless. I saw how Black people were disproportionately dying of COVID-19, and I knew that I needed to help, somehow. Misinformation and conspiracy theories were going viral on social media. I was inundated with everything from recommendations to drink warm water to tweets that said that low rates of infection in African countries meant Black people could not catch COVID-19. I knew that this sort of information could put my friends and family at risk, so I tried to stamp misinformation out, vigorously. I am not proud of my early responses – I would often lash out at friends when they shared these things, instead of validating their very real fears. I should have been better at listening, knowing that they were only trying to assuage valid concerns that scientists could not yet answer convincingly. I decided that I could best serve my community with knowledge. That meant enrolling in the Moderna Vaccine trial as a gift to myself and my community.

Enrolling on the trial made sense for me. I saw a 50% chance of receiving a safe and effective vaccine. I attended virtual seminars by international experts talking about vaccine studies they had been doing for years to fight the SARS and MERS viruses [1–3]. The years of research they did on viruses similar to the one causing COVID-19 reassured me, because it meant that the vaccines could not have been rushed. I got an email when the first volunteer was enrolled on the Moderna Phase 1 trial back in March. I read the papers that were published on animal studies of vaccines for this virus [4,5]. By September, it was clear to me that we had an incredibly good chance of getting a vaccine that worked and was safe. The question was, how fast will we get these vaccines, and how can I help?

At my initial study visit, I remember one of the nurses saying that she was not someone who took the flu vaccine every year. However, with her experiences working on this clinical trial, she gained new trust in the science, and she was looking forward to taking her own shot,

once the COVID vaccine was available to her. I hoped that sharing my story about the vaccine might give others a new trust in the science.

In October, I received my second vaccine dose. Even though they told me that I might have an immune response, I was not quite prepared for what happened next. I developed a quarter-sized welt on my arm, unlike anything from any other vaccine I have received. I started to feel tired and achy that evening. I went to sleep but woke up with shaking chills and a temperature of 102°F. While I did finally make it back to sleep, I was still feeling achy the next morning. I felt better by noon. More importantly, I also felt lucky, because I knew that all of those symptoms meant my body must have mounted a vigorous immune response [6]. Recognizing that I likely did not receive placebo, I realized how important it would be for people to be educated about what to expect. I worried people would be afraid to take a vaccine that made them feel ill, even if it were only temporary. This further reinforced to me that I would need to tell my own story when the time came.

I recently shared my participation in the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine trial on social media. Somewhat to my surprise, many people thanked me for my contribution. In reality, I was excited to participate. I felt that, as a Black person, it was important that I participate in the trial. I knew that Black people would be particularly susceptible to disinformation campaigns, due to the long history of transgressions and neglect our community has suffered at the hands of medicine, perhaps most infamously represented by the “Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment” [7]. It is hard to tell someone to trust doctors and science if they have not met a doctor who they feel cares about them. I knew that saying, “Yes, I took the vaccine before we even knew that it worked,” would be more compelling than just regurgitating the data.

Has my participation paid off? I am not sure. Anecdotally, I have definitely had friends perk up when I tell them I was on the trial, and then tell me that they will take the vaccine when it is offered. Other friends just get silent and stop talking. I know that it is still too early to reach the quiet ones. I am trying to share my experience as widely as I can, but I know that skepticism remains. Sadly, this skepticism is now bearing out in the data. Where data on race have been collected, Black people are consistently lagging behind in vaccination rates [8].

In early January, I confirmed that I had, in fact, received active vaccine back in September and October. The following week, my two 67-year-old parents each got their first shot of the Moderna vaccine, the same vaccine that I helped get across the finish line. Thinking about that brings tears to my eyes.

I hope that my trial participation will lead to more happy moments, like the one my family has experienced. If one person

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reading this decides to get the shot or calls their loved one to convince them to sign up, my experience on the trial will have been well worth it.

#### **Declaration of Competing Interest**

Dr. Nduom has nothing to disclose.

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