



HEALTH NEWS

# Morehouse School of Medicine to receive millions to diversify clinical studies

Healthcare giant Sanofi gives \$18 million to three Historically Black Medical Schools



Michael Bloomberg with Dr. Valerie Montgomery Rice, president of Morehouse School of Medicine following the announcement of the gift of \$175 million for the HBCU medical school. The school recently received a grant from Sanofi, the maker of popular brand-name healthcare treatments and vaccines to support diversity in clinical research. Contributed by Morehouse School of Medicine

**By Roni Robbins – Special to the AJC**

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Minority racial and ethnic groups are historically underrepresented in clinical trials that test experimental and potentially lifesaving medical advancements, according to the U.S. [Food and Drug Administration](#), which approves new products brought to market.

Morehouse School of Medicine may play a role in changing the lack of diversity in clinical testing as one of three historically Black medical schools receiving a \$18 million gift from Sanofi, the maker of popular brand-name health care treatments and vaccines.

On Wednesday, Morehouse School of Medicine announced it will receive the Sanofi investment in clinical study diversity over 10 years, along with Howard University College of Medicine and Meharry Medical College. The amount was not broken down by school but will be used to make pharmacy upgrades to meet clinical trial requirements and create customized training programs for researchers who can lead the investigations, among other uses, Morehouse School of Medicine reported.



“It will definitely open doors for us,” said Priscilla Pemu, director of the Clinical Research Center at the medical school and associate dean of clinical research. She said the funding expands upon about \$14 million the medical school received in 2021 from another pharmaceutical company, Novartis, to expand diversity among clinical trial investigators and participants. Novartis also made a 10-year commitment to work with Morehouse School of Medicine, other historically Black colleges and universities and medical schools, along with pharmaceutical companies such as Sanofi to improve health equity.

Such efforts grew from concerns raised during the COVID-19 pandemic, which disproportionately impacted people of color, said Pemu, who is also a professor of medicine. She said some of the clinical trials the funding will address include issues of obesity, asthma and cancers that disproportionately impact the Black community.

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Morehouse School of Medicine receives \$175M donation in largest gift to HBCUs

The Sanofi funding comes on the heels of the [largest-ever gift](#) to historically Black colleges and universities announced in August by Michael R. Bloomberg’s philanthropic organization. The \$600 million gift from Bloomberg Philanthropies was to be divided among the country’s four historically Black medical schools, which includes Charles R. Drew University of Medicine & Science in South Los Angeles, to address the lack of diversity in medical training.

Morehouse School of Medicine will receive \$175 million — the largest single donation the school has ever received — as part of that award. Bloomberg Philanthropies cited the systematic underinvestment in Black institutions and communities when awarding the funding.



The massive gift was expected to tackle the medical school's rising costs and associated student debt, which makes medical education difficult for aspiring doctors. Black men and women graduating from medical school are more likely to have debt than other racial and ethnic groups, according to a study last year detailed in [The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education](#).

The newest funding to the medical schools helps address the lack of diversity in clinical trials, research studies in which volunteers evaluate products, such as medications, vaccines or medical devices, for safety and effectiveness.

"Ensuring people from diverse backgrounds join clinical trials is key to advancing health equity," the FDA stated in its consumer information online. "Participants in clinical trials should represent the patients that will use the medical products. This is often not the case — people from racial and ethnic minority and other diverse groups are underrepresented in clinical research. This is a concern because people of different ages, races and ethnicities may react differently to certain medical products."

For instance, lung cancer disproportionately affects Black men, who are about 12% [more likely to develop the disease](#) than white men, according to the American Cancer Society's recent estimates. Yet the number of Black patients participating in studies of genetically targeted lung cancer therapies lag behind what would be appropriate based on the incidence of the disease in the Black population, James W. Lillard Jr., a Morehouse School of Medicine dean for research and innovation, wrote in an [opinion piece](#) in The Atlanta Journal-Constitution earlier this year.

He cited data from a [2021 study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association](#). "In short, white participants were consistently overrepresented in lung cancer clinical trials, while Black participants were a staggering 68% underrepresented."

## About the Author

### **Roni Robbins – Special to the AJC**

Roni Robbins is an award-winning reporter, editor, and author of Hands of Gold. This is her second stint as a freelance reporter for the AJC, <http://www.ronirobbins.com>.