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CRAIN'S HEALTH PULSE NEW YORK

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Pharmacies get more vaccination power but still seek to do more

Plus:

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RYAN DEFFENBAUGH   

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Local independent pharmacies cheered new state guidance authorizing them to vaccinate a larger swath of New Yorkers against Covid-19. But because pharmacists still face some

restrictions as to which eligible populations they are allowed to vaccinate, they are calling on the state to allow them to do more.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo said Monday that vaccine providers, including pharmacies, can vaccinate individuals 50 and older starting today. The announcement followed guidance last week—which Cuomo publicly detailed Sunday—clearing pharmacies to vaccinate New Yorkers with approved preexisting conditions.

Pharmacies had previously been limited to inoculating people over 60, along with teachers and child care workers. Pharmacy owners called on the state last week to allow the locations to vaccinate all eligible New Yorkers.

"These are great populations for us to vaccinate, but we believe we should open it up to more people," said Steve Moore, chairman of the Pharmacists Society of New York, an industry group for independent pharmacies.

Eligible groups such as food service workers and public-facing government employees, for example, are still barred from getting their shots at pharmacies. A state Health Department spokesperson said the restrictions are in place to ensure enough supply for educators, after President Joe Biden called on states to prioritize them.

State Sen. Jeremy Cooney, a Rochester lawmaker, wrote a letter last week, signed by 37 legislators, calling on Cuomo to allow pharmacies to vaccinate all eligible New Yorkers.

"The new expansion, while welcomed, is not what the 37 members of the Senate majority requested," Cooney said in a statement Sunday night. "We continue to urge [Cuomo] to simplify vaccination access and eliminate unnecessary barriers for patients and providers."

State guidance sent to vaccine distributors March 17 said pharmacies could begin inoculating New Yorkers with eligible comorbidities but should still prioritize teachers and child care workers, in keeping with federal guidance that says all educators should get at least one dose by the end of this month.

"To meet the federal mandate, we are trying to ensure high availability for the educator population at pharmacies through the month of March," said Jill Montag, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Health.

A bill passed in June allowing pharmacies to vaccinate for Covid-19 did not include any restrictions on who would be eligible, said State Sen. Brad Hoylman, a Manhattan

lawmaker who led the legislation.

"The more distribution to pharmacies the better, as we have seen from surveys that individual trust going to their doctor and pharmacy more than a larger public space," Hoylman said. "Anything that allows pharmacists to take on this role of vaccinating more is better," he said.

At Mt. Carmel Pharmacy in the Little Italy section of the Bronx, the governor's back-to-back announcements led to a day of steady phone calls Monday from customers who wanted to know if they were now eligible, said owner Roger Paganelli. Although he welcomed the change, he said he had to search for clarification on whether the new age limit applied to pharmacies after hearing about it through a news alert.

"The guidance is changing fast, and that puts us—meaning independent pharmacies trying to vaccinate as many people as possible—in a tricky situation," Paganelli said.

Keeping up with the changing rules and communicating them to customers while dealing with day-to-day pharmacy business is a challenge, he said.

"If I'm making pizza for 240 people and they call you 15 minutes out, there is no way you are going to have that ready," Paganelli said. "Give us a heads-up so we can plan."

New York facilities had administered 7.7 million vaccine doses as of Monday, according to the governor's office. New York City has received 2.3 million of those doses, with about 1.2 million New Yorkers fully vaccinated. —Ryan Deffenbaugh and Maya Kaufman

4 city institutions get \$6M grant to decrease clinical trial disparities

Researchers at Mount Sinai, **City College** of New York, Albert Einstein Cancer Center and Columbia University's Herbert Irving Comprehensive Cancer Center are teaming up on a \$6 million initiative to diversify clinical trials for cancer research and treatment, according to an announcement Tuesday.

The nonprofit Stand Up to Cancer chose the four institutions as the recipients of a multimillion-dollar research grant, funded by biotechnology company Genentech, that will go toward finding ways to increase the participation of Black, indigenous and people of color in clinical trials.

"We're really trying to blow up the way people think about clinical trials," said Dr. Nina Bickell, who is co-leading the research team. "The system just hasn't been working for so much of our population."

Bickell, a longtime researcher in cancer disparities and co-lead of cancer prevention and control for the Tisch Cancer Institute at Mount Sinai, said the team will design an approach to find trials that are a good fit for a patient rather than finding patients to fit a trial. In doing so, she said, the researchers will look to counteract implicit biases in how they are formulated and participants are selected.

Dr. Bruce Rapkin, associate director of community outreach and engagement at the Albert Einstein Cancer Center, said increasing diversity in cancer trials is an important step toward making personalized care available to more people.

"Health equity depends on representation in research," he said.

Just 4% of participants in cancer clinical trials are Black, and 5% are Hispanic, according to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, even though marginalized communities in the United States have the highest death rate and shortest survival times for most cancers.

The four institutions, working as the Health Equity Breakthrough Team, will focus on breast, prostate and liver cancers, which disproportionately affect racial and ethnic minority populations. —M.K.

Union Square health analytics company raises \$220M, becomes a unicorn

Komodo Health, a health care analytics startup with offices in Union Square and San Francisco, has raised \$220 million at a \$3.3 billion valuation, the company said Monday.

Founded in 2014, Komodo analyzes large pools of data from health care providers, pharmaceutical companies and biotech firms and uses artificial intelligence to find potential insights for medical research.

The company's HealthCare platform uses AI and data analytics to track encounters with the health care system for more than 325 million patients, providing insights such as common diagnoses and outcomes across different areas of the country. Health care providers subscribe to the company's software for insights into treatments as well as biotech and medical research.

The company has raised \$314 million total. Tiger Global and Casdin Capital led the latest round, joined by previous investors Iconiq Growth and Andreessen Horowitz, among others. Andreessen Horowitz is among the best-known venture capital firms in the world, with early investments in Facebook, Lyft and Instagram. Iconiq Growth recently led a \$150 million funding round for Unite Us, a Lower Manhattan software startup focused on connecting health and social care providers.

Komodo did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the deal, outside of a corporate blog post. MobiHealthNews reported the valuation of the firm as \$3.3 billion.

This is the Series E investment round for the firm, following a \$44 million deal closed in January. The company was founded in San Francisco but has a corporate office on Fifth Avenue near Union Square with 100 employees, about half its total headcount, a spokesperson told tech recruiting site BuiltInNYC earlier this year.

Komodo is the second newly minted health-tech unicorn in New York in as many weeks, following the \$150 million Unite Us investment. —R.D.

Meet Crain's 40 Under 40 honorees Eric Wei and Karsten Vagner

The ambitious young professionals who make up Crain's 2021 class of 40 Under 40 honorees represent New York's major industries, from technology to real estate. Six impressive individuals carried the banner for the health care sector this year. Get to know two of them below.

Eric Wei, 39

Senior vice president and chief quality officer, NYC Health + Hospitals

On Feb. 10, 2020, Dr. Eric Wei and his wife, Lili, welcomed their third child, Aiden. Just three weeks later Covid-19 arrived in New York City, and Wei was tasked with helping to take on the worst pandemic in 100 years as chief quality officer of NYC Health + Hospitals.

Wei said it was heart-wrenching to be isolated from his family for eight weeks, starting in March, but he feared bringing the disease home. Beyond his administrative role, Wei treated patients at Kings County Hospital in Brooklyn and remembered the swiftness with which Covid-19 overwhelmed the hospital's emergency room.

"It went from, 'Do we test this person?' to 'Everybody has Covid, and who do we intubate next?'" Wei said.

During the height of the pandemic, Wei focused on working to more evenly distribute Covid-19 patients across the 11-hospital system and coordinated its emergency department response. Some facilities, Elmhurst Hospital among them, were besieged with cases, whereas others had beds to spare. As the volume of Covid-19 hospitalizations subsided, he oversaw planning for the second wave, which emerged in late 2020, to ensure workers had the necessary training and equipment.

In 2018 Wei spearheaded the program Helping Healers Heal, which focuses on giving hospital workers a chance to cope with the emotional trauma they endure at work. The system has leaned on it during the pandemic.

"We're all just scratching the surface of how this pandemic has changed us," Wei said. "We fight every day because we believe there shouldn't be two standards of health care—one for those with means and one for those without."

Dr. Mitchell Katz, CEO of NYC Health + Hospitals, said he recruited Wei from the Los Angeles public health system because of the way staffers responded to him.

"I'm a big believer that to make change, other people have to want to follow you and want you to succeed," Katz said. "I could see that in the quality improvement efforts Eric was doing." — Jonathan LaMantia

Karsten Vagner, 39

Vice president, people, Maven Clinic

Karsten Vagner has led human resources at one high-profile startup after another, but he only landed in the profession by accident. In 2008 he was employee number three at health-tech startup ZocDoc, and, like everyone else, worked in a number of roles. Then he found himself in the "people" department.

"It was so clear to me—I just had this lightbulb moment—that that was the function that had the most impact on a company," Vagner said. "If you get that right, you can do anything."

The past year at Maven Clinic, which he joined in mid-2019, has once again proved his thesis. The virtual clinic, which focuses on women's health, has seen stratospheric growth

during the pandemic as the use of telemedicine has surged—and as more companies have recognized the need for Maven's services.

The Manhattan-based company has doubled its number of employees this past year, adding 100 of them without any in-person meetings.

"We had to build a process that makes sure we're vetting and engaging the right people—and getting them to put their trust in us without our ever having an office to show them or even shaking their hand," Vagner said.

In addition, the death of George Floyd in May 2020 and the activism it inspired brought demands for greater equity and inclusiveness. Vagner's job now includes helping employees make their workplace more diverse.

"At the company level, when we talk about goals and performance, we include diversity," he said.

Maven founder and CEO Kate Ryder, who herself was a Crain's 40 Under 40 honoree in 2019, said Vagner's "empathy, flexibility and creativity" helped the company get through a tough year.

"A people leader is one of the most critical roles at a high-growth startup," she said. "It's why Karsten reports to me directly, and that won't be changing." — Matthew Flamm

AT A GLANCE

COVID ANTIBODIES: Most cancer patients who contracted Covid-19 developed antibody levels similar to those seen in people without cancer, according to a new study by [Montefiore Health System](#) and Albert Einstein College of Medicine. The study, published Monday in *Nature Cancer*, suggests that people with cancer will respond well to coronavirus vaccines and are likely as protected from Covid-19 reinfection as those without cancer.

VACCINES RELOCATE: Covid-19 vaccine sites at city high schools will be relocated, consolidated or switched to a modified schedule now that high schoolers have returned to the classroom. Appointments at affected locations will be automatically rescheduled, the city Department of Health said.

HERD IMMUNITY: The Suburban Hospital Alliance of New York State launched a herd immunity-themed social media campaign to encourage all New Yorkers to get a Covid-19 vaccine as soon as they're eligible. The alliance represents hospitals on Long Island and in the Hudson Valley.

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