



Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy - Action Plan

Statement of Intent – September 2024

Theme: Pain

Leadership

The theme is committed to inclusive leadership. We have been developing an ongoing strategy to ensure that as many senior-level pain theme investigators as possible have the opportunity to engage in the MSD Inclusive Leadership Program, or some other equivalent. We have also outlined a theme values framework that embeds our principles of responsible leadership, incorporating accountability, transparency, trust and integrity. This is based on research culture cafes undertaken with a professional facilitator to outline core values that underscores how we approach our science, and balance leadership with team science, and individual science.

Team science

We will embrace EDI as we build teams to undertake the research, tracking not just recruitment (we are already committed to inclusive hiring practices) but how we support individuals at every level across the whole theme throughout the course of the BRC. We have developed and piloted a new tool to measure inclusivity, using network analysis of researcher interactions. This has been piloted within our wider department and will be rolled out across the department next year. In doing so, we aim to be able to formally demonstrate that we have no significant difference in measured inclusivity throughout the duration of the BRC. At the same time, we also recognise the value of championing the individual, and balancing team incentives versus individual incentives, working to support autonomy, individual creativity, individual responsibility and professional development.

The science we do

We have recognised an inherent bias in much of pain research, which often fails to capture the voices of the full demographic of individuals suffering from chronic pain. Our early research (as yet, unpublished) has shown that people from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds are disproportionately affected by chronic pain. This finding underscores the urgent need to bring questions related to inclusivity into focus, especially to understand environmental influences contributing to pain and pain-related disability, as well as the broader issue of multimorbidity.

A key challenge we face is how data is collected, as certain populations – such as neurodiverse people or those with mental health challenges, significant disabilities or from different cultural and religious backgrounds, may be less likely to participate in research studies. This potential exclusion highlights the importance of rethinking our research methodology to ensure inclusivity.

In response, we launched the 'Inclusive Labs Project', which aims to redesign our experimental frameworks to be accessible and inclusive across a wide range of dimensions. This is an ongoing, iterative process that involved embedding a culture of inclusivity into all aspects of our work, to ensure that our research practices evolve continually to better serve diverse populations.

Involving people with lived experience

Our PPI activities to date have highlighted the urgent need to understand how people with lived experience of pain from disadvantaged backgrounds may be discriminated against both in healthcare delivery and within the scope of chronic pain research. This is a serious concern that we are committed to addressing.

At the heart of our response is the 'Living with Pain' project - a PPI engagement initiative led by a skilled artist with extensive experience of working with people from minority and low socioeconomic backgrounds. This project aims to explore how an individual's environment – including their home, community, and social context – shapes their lived experience of pain, their symptoms, and their access to care. We are at an advanced stage of the project, and early feedback has revealed the profound extent of disadvantage and marginalisation faced by these communities – not only in terms of living with chronic pain but also in their ability to have their voices heard and effect meaningful change.

Public engagement activities

Listening to the diverse experiences of people with chronic pain goes hand in hand with the responsibility to engage them in understanding the outcomes and impact of our research. Our work to date has shown that many communication channels fail to reach large parts of the public, which prompted us to explore more effective ways of communication. We are committed to ensuring that every voice is heard, and that no individual living with the loss of ability and dignity caused by chronic pain is overlooked.

This effort is part of our broader vision for the future of chronic pain research – a vision built on partnership with every person, shaped by their lived experience, and inclusive of all, regardless of cultural or socioeconomic background.