

Conveners Alone Can't Change the Ecosystem



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Collaborative efforts large and small bring together multiple viewpoints that advance the search for cures.

As the coach of your hometown sports team or manager of your favorite band will tell you, we can do more together than we can alone. Traditionally medical research, however, has taken a siloed approach, working in parallel but rarely crossing the barrier to collaboration. More recently, the field has accepted that a model of partnership is the path to progress, especially around the complex challenges that inhibit our understanding and treatment of brain disease.

Still, more can be done.

Large-scale, public-private studies to address limitations in clinical and biological understanding of the two most common neurodegenerative

diseases have laid a foundation for further collaboration. The Alzheimer's Disease Neuroimaging Initiative (ADNI), led by the National Institutes of Health with nearly 30 industry partners and researchers from 55 sites, set a precedent for how these partnerships could work. Soon after, the Parkinson's Progression Markers Initiative (PPMI), spearheaded by The Michael J. Fox Foundation (MJFF) with 19 industry partners at 33 sites, took a similar tack in pursuit of Parkinson's biomarkers.

These studies make data and bio-specimens available to the broader research community to speed the pace of discovery and replication, and each brings the neuroscience field closer to critical measures of disease and more precise trial

design. ADNI and PPMI serve as a resource for pharmaceutical companies for disease modeling, sample collection protocols and more. The fact that participants remain in the study for years, and undergo multiple sample collection procedures, is encouraging to companies plotting their therapeutic development.

However, while ADNI and PPMI have built invaluable infrastructure, all collaboration need not be on such a large scale. Take the case of LRRK2 inhibitors, a promising route to Parkinson's disease modification

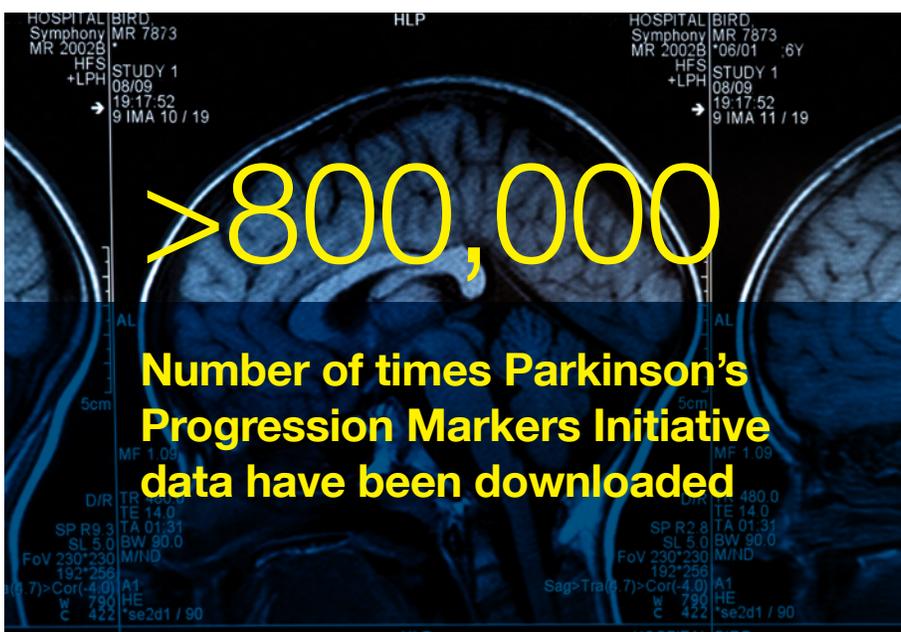
but one that raised a potential safety flag in initial pre-clinical testing. Three pharmaceutical competitors — Genentech, Merck and Pfizer — joined an unprecedented collaboration, led by MJFF, to share compounds and understand how to further investigate the safety concerns. The group's findings ultimately green lighted this area of research for continued development.

While a unique convener such as the federal government, or an advocacy and research organization such as ours, can help broker such partnerships, we cannot solely

change the ecosystem. Companies and academics should seek out collaborators with common goals and build on strengths to advance toward those desired outcomes.

One way to be a collaborator of many is to share data. We understand that industry and investigators pour many dollars and years into gathering and analyzing information, but, within a reasonable timeframe, those data should be made accessible to others. PPMI data have been downloaded more than 800,000 times, and some early learnings — on the frequency of

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cognitive impairment in early-stage Parkinson's disease, for example — have come from researchers outside the study using the open-access information. Such analysis does not hinder the primary aims of the study but exponentially deepens the impact of the investment.

Multiple viewpoints bring new perspectives and ideas that generate progress, and these successes illustrate what's possible when we collaborate. United approaches to problem solving and efficiency benefit not only the partners involved but, more importantly, the millions of patients counting on us to develop cures.