



March 16, 2022

The Honorable Anna Eshoo
Chairwoman
Subcommittee on Health
House Energy and Commerce Committee
272 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Brett Guthrie
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Health
House Energy and Commerce Committee
2434 Rayburn H.O.B.
Washington, DC 20515

RE: H.R. 5566 (McCarthy) FINDING ORPHAN-DISEASE REMEDIES WITH ANTIFUNGAL RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT ACT OF 2021 (FORWARD ACT of 2021) – SUPPORT

Dear Chairwoman Eshoo and Ranking Member Guthrie:

On behalf of the Valley Fever Institute at Kern Medical we are pleased to express our position of support for H.R. 5566, or the FORWARD Act of 2021, which is aimed at combating Valley Fever. Since the Valley Fever Institute at Kern Medical is located in the epicenter of Valley Fever cases and in the heart of California, we see firsthand the tremendous impact the FORWARD Act will have on the health of our community. This legislation would strengthen research and help advance treatment and vaccine development for *Coccidioidomycosis*, commonly known as Valley Fever, as well as other orphan endemic fungal diseases.

According to the California Department of Public Health, over the past 10 years in Kern County there have been an average of 2,235 cases of Valley Fever per year with an average of 15 deaths per year resulting from the infection. During an epidemic year, those figures can swell to around 3,000 cases. A record high of 9,286 cases were reported statewide in 2019, with 3,373 cases in Kern County.

Valley Fever is an infectious, but not contagious, fungal disease contracted by inhaling spores of a fungus that grows in the dirt in many areas of the Southwestern United States. The majority of Valley Fever is asymptomatic or mild, with illness resembling the flu or pneumonia. Only 10% of patients will have disease severe enough to seek medical attention and receive a diagnosis. Approximately 1% of patients develop disseminated disease, where the fungus spreads outside the lungs, most commonly to the brain, skin, bones, and joints. For these patients, there is a high risk of lifelong damage or death without treatment. Available drugs can produce substantial clinical benefit; however, treatment is lengthy, expensive, and not always successful. Clinical treatment failure and intolerance are common. There is no current drug that eradicates Valley Fever; an average of 200 patients die from Valley Fever annually. This disease can affect anyone that lives, works, or travels to endemic areas; an elevated risk of occupational exposure exists for those who work outdoors, especially in connection with soil disruption.



The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) suggests that Valley Fever is not only a serious illness, but also a costly one. Nearly 75% of people with Valley Fever miss work and school. As many as 40% of people who get Valley Fever need to stay in the hospital. The average cost of a hospital stay for a person with Valley Fever is almost \$50,000. With a vaccine to prevent and reduce severity of infection, improvement in available testing, and the development of new antifungal drugs, it is possible to lower the impact of this disease on our community.

For these reasons, The Valley Fever Institute at Kern Medical endorses H.R. 5566 and respectfully urges your Subcommittee's support for this legislation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Royce H. Johnson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "R".

Royce H. Johnson, M.D., F.A.C.P., F.I.D.S.A.
Professor of Medicine
David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA
Chief, Infectious Disease, Kern Medical
Medical Director, Valley Fever Institute