

Press Release

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Roots Community Health Center: Pulse Oximeter Study

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ROOTS CHALLENGES MANUFACTURERS TO FIX FLAWED HEALTH DEVICE

OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA Following a recent study published in the American Journal of Epidemiology determining that pulse oximeters routinely overestimate the oxygen levels in African American patients resulting in delayed treatment and reduced hospital admissions for COVID19, Roots Community Health Center challenged leading manufacturers and sellers of pulse ox machines to redesign and/or issue warnings about their devices' shortcomings.

In a recent letter, Roots informed the device makers that they must adequately address the issue or face litigation.

Roots, a community based organization committed to addressing systemic inequities and health disparities impacting people of African descent, is prepared to ask the California courts to order an injunction prohibiting further sales of faulty pulse oximeters until consumers of color are adequately protected.

Widely used in all health care settings and available over-the-counter to consumers nationwide, pulse oximeters measure the amount of oxygen in a person's blood to signal whether medical intervention is needed to treat people suffering from cardiovascular, other issues and respiratory illnesses including COVID.

"We should all be outraged," said Roots CEO, Dr. Noha Aboelata. "Pulse oximeters' flaws for people with darker skin tones have been known as far back as 1999. And yet the problem persists – even while African Americans suffered and died from COVID at far greater rates than their white counterparts."

In Alameda County, California, where Roots is based, African Americans are dying from COVID at twice the rate of whites. Nationally, recent data indicate the death rate for African Americans is 442 per 100,000 compared to 269 per 100,000 for whites. Higher rates of death exist for other non-white groups as well.

Roots partnered with Sutter Health on the study after Roots clinicians wanted to understand why there were such disparities in rates of death among their African American patients.

It appears that first responders and other front-line health care professionals wrongly relied on potentially inflated pulse oximeter readings for patients of color. As a result, it is likely that they failed to recommend certain patients obtain emergent care.

For their part, patients of color who purchased pulse oximeters for at-home use may have erroneously trusted their machines' readings when deciding whether and when to seek professional intervention for the medical distress they were experiencing.

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"Delays in treatment as a result of faulty pulse oximeter readings are potentially catastrophic because patients can be deprived of life-saving oxygen," said Dr. Aboelata, who helped spearhead the pathbreaking study.

"The pulse oximeter scandal is an example of the tragic harm that occurs when the nation's health care industry and the regulatory agencies that neglect the realities of non-white patients," Aboelata said. "The story of the making, marketing and use of racially-biased pulse oximeters is an indictment of our healthcare system's commitment to health equity."

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About Roots:

Founded in 2008 in Oakland, California, Roots Community Health Center provides a unique blend of health care and complementary services to build patient self-sufficiency and community empowerment through a whole person approach to wellness including medical and behavioral health care, social enterprises, housing, and community outreach and advocacy. Roots annually provides nearly 16,000 clinical visits, including 1,300 to homeless individuals and transition services to approximately 1000 formerly incarcerated persons. Roots Community Health Center is committed to uplifting those impacted by systemic inequities and poverty. Learn more at www.rootsclinic.org.