Specific Aims

Lung cancer disproportionately affects Black men and women, who experience higher incidence and mortality rates compared to non-Hispanic Whites. Environmental exposures, such as air pollution, and tumor genomic profiles likely contribute to these disparities. The overarching goal of this research is to elucidate the molecular links between environmental exposures, social determinants, and tumor evolution Black lung cancer patients.

Aim 1: Investigate the mechanistic link between $PM_{2.5}$ exposure and aggressive lung cancer biology in Black men and women *Hypothesis: Exposure to $PM_{2.5}$ is associated with aggressive lung cancer biology in Black patients.*

- Determine the association between $PM_{2.5}$ exposure and TP53 somatic mutations in a cohort of 505 lung cancer patients
- Assess the relationship between adverse social determinants of health and $PM_{2.5}$ exposure
- Validate the association between $PM_{2.5}$ and aggressive lung cancer biology using an independent cohort
- Integrate $PM_{2.5}$ exposure data with tumor genomic profiles to identify specific mutational signatures associated with air pollution exposure

Aim 2: Characterize the timing and order of somatic mutations during lung cancer evolution *Hypothesis: The timing and order of somatic mutations differs between Black and White lung cancer patients.*

- Reconstruct tumor phylogenetic trees to infer the timing of driver mutations and copy number alterations
- Identify common patterns in the order of genomic events across lung cancer subtypes
- Determine whether the timing of mutations differs between Black and White patients

Aim 3: Map cell-cell signaling networks in the lung tumor microenvironment *Hypothesis: The lung tumor microenvironment signaling network is altered in Black patients compared to Whites.*

- Reconstruct ligand-receptor interactions between malignant, immune, stromal and endothelial cells using single-cell RNA sequencing
- Identify key signaling pathways and cell-cell interactions associated with early lung cancer development
- Determine how the tumor microenvironment signaling network differs between Black and White patients

This research will provide novel insights into the biological mechanisms underlying lung cancer disparities in Black patients. By integrating data on environmental exposures, tumor genomics, and the tumor microenvironment, we aim to identify specific molecular signatures and signaling pathways that contribute to aggressive lung cancer biology in this high-risk population. These findings could inform the development of targeted prevention and diagnosis strategies to reduce lung cancer disparities.

Research Strategy

Significance

Lung Cancer and Environmental Exposures Lung cancer remains the leading cause of cancer-related mortality worldwide, with non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) accounting for 85% of lung cancer cases in the US.[1] Akin to tobacco smoking, exposure to the complex mixture of air pollution, particularly fine particulate matter ($PM_{2.5}$) and nitric oxide (NO), poses a major risk factor for developing lung cancer. In heavily polluted cities like Los Angeles, exposure to these pollutants significantly increases the risk of developing lung cancer.[2,3] In 2014, the Nurse's Health Study found that living within 200 meters of a highway and a $10\ \mu g/m^3$ increase in $PM_{2.5}$ levels were associated with an increased risk of lung cancer (HR = 1.57; 95% CI: 1.26, 1.77).[4] Furthermore, a 2019 meta-analysis estimated that a $10\ \mu g/m^3$ increase in $PM_{2.5}$ exposure in Europe and North America increased lung cancer risk by 25%.[5]

Despite the clear evidence linking air pollution exposure to elevated lung cancer risk, the precise molecular mechanisms by which these complex pollutant mixtures initiate and promote NSCLC remain poorly understood, representing a critical knowledge gap. This study will investigate lung cancer in Blacks, an understudied group that exhibits a high prevalence of aggressive, early-onset tumors that are often driven by distinct molecular profiles like EGFR mutations.[6] Elucidating the environmental drivers and biological pathways of lung carcinogenesis in this subgroup could reveal novel diagnostic approaches.

Addressing Lung Cancer Inequities in Blacks Although African Americans/Blacks (Blacks) have lower smoking rates compared to non-Hispanic Whites, they experience significantly higher lung cancer incidence and mortality rates, especially among men.[7–9] This disparity is striking, as Blacks tend to initiate smoking later in life and consume fewer cigarettes compared to their White counterparts.[8,10] Black women, despite smoking fewer cigarettes, have the same or higher incidence of lung cancer as White women.

Current lung cancer screening guidelines based on pack-years and age[11] fail to adequately identify Blacks at risk. Blacks are diagnosed with lung cancer at a significantly younger age than Whites, often before reaching the screening threshold of 30 pack-years or age 55.[12] The molecular drivers underlying these aggressive, early-onset lung cancers in the Black population remain unclear. However, disparities in environmental exposures, particularly air pollution, are suspected to play a role.[6] Evidence shows that Blacks are consistently exposed to significantly higher levels of $PM_{2.5}$ and NO compared to non-Hispanic Whites. This study will utilize a multi-regional cohort of non-smokers, former smokers, and smokers, to identify the molecular connections between air pollutants and lung cancer in Blacks.

Furthermore, existing studies do not account for how social determinants of health in Blacks may modulate susceptibility to cancers.[9] Addressing this gap is crucial for accurately assessing risk and developing prevention strategies in diverse populations.

Characterization of Environmental Exposure Outdoor air pollution, including $PM_{2.5}$, is classified as a Group 1 carcinogen by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC).[13] Past studies demonstrate a clear link between residing near major roadways and an elevated risk of developing lung cancer.[13] Exhaust from combustion engines releases a mixture of carcinogenic compounds into the atmosphere near major roadways. These pollutants include polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), nitrogen oxides, and toxic heavy metals such as arsenic, nickel, and lead.[14] Previous studies have attempted to map air pollution levels using census tract data. However, these methods only detect a limited subset of pollutants, failing to capture the full complexity of environmental pollutants. Moreover, existing research does not account for how rising global temperatures associated with climate change may alter the chemical composition and carcinogenic potency of air pollution over time. Another major shortcoming is the lack of integration of social determinants of health, such as obesity, diabetes, and chronic inflammatory conditions, which may exacerbate susceptibility to cancer.

Potential for Transformative Impact This study will employ advanced geospatial methods to precisely quantify individual exposures to air pollutants in Black communities in LA, Chicago, New Orleans, Charlestown SC, Richmond VA, and Rochester NY. Crucially, it will integrate this environmental exposure data with social determinants of health and biological factors that modulate disease susceptibility in these communities. Black populations in LA have historically faced disproportionately higher exposure to air pollution due to factors like redlining, the placing of industrial facilities near their neighborhoods, and a lack of green spaces. Despite having some of the lowest rates of smoking in the US, LA suffers from some of the worst highway-generated air pollution. By precisely characterizing these elevated exposures and combining them with data on obesity, diabetes, chronic inflammation, and other risk factors prevalent in Black communities, the goal is to develop a comprehensive model elucidating how environmental drivers interact synergistically with social and biological parameters to initiate and promote aggressive, early-onset NSCLC in this population.

This multidisciplinary approach, combining external exposure assessments with internal susceptibility factors, will provide novel mechanistic insights into the environmental carcinogenesis pathways driving the excess lung cancer burden observed in Black communities. By integrating precise air pollution exposure data with epidemiological cohorts and molecular tumor profiling from Black NSCLC patients, this study will generate a comprehensive model of how environmental insults precipitate lung carcinogenesis in the context of social and biological vulnerabilities in this underserved population. Insights from this

innovative approach have the potential to transform our understanding of air pollution's role in NSCLC etiology in Blacks and identify new opportunities for targeted prevention, early detection, and treatment strategies. This is particularly important as while the rates of most lung cancers are declining, the incidence of NSCLC in non-smoking women of color is rapidly rising in LA and other cities.

Innovation

While lung cancer in smokers is well-studied, far less is known about environmental contributors in Black non-smokers. Investigating subtype-specific mechanisms could reveal novel vulnerabilities for targeted therapies. This proposal introduces several innovative elements to advance our understanding of air pollution's role in lung cancer. While previous studies have relied on census tract pollution maps that fail to capture individual exposures and pollutant complexity, this study pioneers advanced geospatial monitoring and modeling to precisely quantify personal exposures to $PM_{2.5}$, PAHs, NO, and metals — critical for defining exposure-response relationships. Existing studies have not accounted for how social determinants like obesity, diabetes, and inflammation modulate environmental cancer risk. This proposal uniquely integrates high-resolution exposure data with comprehensive individual health parameters to model the complex interplay between external exposures and internal susceptibility. By combining exposure science with epidemiology and molecular biology, this study will provide a comprehensive model that elucidates the environmental drivers and biological mechanisms underlying environmentally induced NSCLC initiation and progression.

Under the mentorship of Dr. Paul Spellman, I will leverage his scientific expertise to identify causal mutational signatures linked to specific carcinogens. I will employ the cutting-edge techniques developed by Dr. Spellman to meticulously pinpoint the molecular alterations induced by environmental exposures, thereby providing a direct link between the components of air pollution and the pathogenesis of lung cancer. Through the implementation of the proposed research, I aim to elucidate the precise mutational signatures associated with exposure to $PM_{2.5}$, PAHs, NO, and toxic metals found within the complex mixture of air pollution. By rigorously identifying these causal relationships, I will establish a direct and unambiguous connection between environmental exposures and the development of lung cancer.

In summary, this proposal leverages advanced exposure monitoring integrated with epidemiological and molecular approaches to generate an unprecedented multidisciplinary model of environmental lung carcinogenesis. This multi-disciplinary approach has the potential to transform our understanding of the role of air pollution in NSCLC and identify new avenues for prevention and early detection, especially in high-risk never-smoker populations.

Approach

Aim 1: Investigate the mechanistic link between $PM_{2.5}$ exposure and aggressive lung cancer biology in Black men and women

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Aim 2: Characterize the timing and order of somatic mutations during lung cancer evolution

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Aim 3: Map cell-cell signaling networks in the lung tumor microenvironment

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