CED Trustee Briefing Summary

June 22, 2020

Guest Speaker: Julie Gerberding, Executive Vice President and Chief Patient Officer, Merck

Topic: COVID-19: Challenges to Reopening

About the role of the CDC during the pandemic, Julie Gerberding said that the CDC has an important role to play in its role as a scientific organization by providing guidance to the public – emphasizing that there is a craving for reliability and leadership during these times. She continued by saying that this crisis may not be the exception, but rather that this may be the beginning of a frequent era of dealing with infectious diseases due to changes in the world today – urbanization, globalization, climate change, conflict in the world resulting in mass displacement which could lead to an insanitary way of living that could cause susceptibility to diseases. She cautioned that there has to be preparation for a combined (CDC, federal & state governments, etc.) effort to deal with such outbreaks in the future.

On the possibility of a second wave, she commented that it is necessary to determine the right balance between a full lockdown and opening business as usual, by raising the points: What is the science telling us? Using common sense for the things we don’t know? Psychology – how to help people feel better by creating some confidence and reassurance? Keeping in mind these three ideas, a point must be found where the spread can be contained while limiting hardships.

In terms of health effects of the COVID-19 virus in changing demographics, Gerberding believed that there is a risk of spread and risk of severe disease, but what we don’t know is in schools, day cares, etc., how much transmission is occurring and how much of the disease spills over from this cohort to households – grandparents, etc.

About the timeline and pace of vaccines, she encouraged cautious optimism about timelines by giving an example of the licensed Ebola vaccine – it was a prolonged process (2014 – 2019), and stressed the need for collaboration with NIH to see the target profile. She highlighted that safety cannot be compromised for speed – if any vaccine has a severe side effect, etc., confidence in vaccines will plummet.
In terms of testing, she brought up the need to deconflict different priorities and the requirement to focus testing on high risk areas, etc., saying that it was an inefficient use of testing if focus is not on “hotspots” as we don’t have sufficient data on how the transmission happens. She also commented that it is highly unlikely to have a licensed vaccine by the end of the year (maybe an emergency-use approved vaccine for health workers, etc. – but not sure by the end of the year). Durability of antibodies in a big issue. Using her personal experiences, her advice for businesses to open was to focus on safety of the employees and their family members – essential personnel only and otherwise working from home to respect the principles of social distancing.