

Common platform for biomedical HIV prevention research being built in Africa

Fifth Forum of the African AIDS Vaccine Programme

Kampala/Geneva, 13 December, 2009—Stressing the critical need to develop a safe, effective HIV vaccine for use in Africa, scientists, leaders, community representatives, and advocates, meeting in Kampala, are calling for a common platform for biomedical HIV prevention research in Africa.

The call was made today at the Fifth Forum of the African AIDS Vaccine Programme (AAVP) which will run from the 13 to 15 December in Kampala.

"The Fifth African AIDS Vaccine Programme Forum is taking place at a crossroads of HIV vaccine research and development," said Dr Alash'le Abimiku, Co-Chair of the AAVP Steering Committee and Chair of the AAVP Transition Panel. "The global HIV vaccine community has recognized that in spite of the good news of the Thai trial, we are still far away from having an effective HIV vaccine, in particular, a vaccine relevant for Africa where we have numerous HIV genetic variants and recombinant viral forms driving regional sub-epidemics. Therefore, our research efforts in Africa must be stepped up."

A common platform for biomedical HIV prevention research means, in practical terms, that clinical HIV vaccine trials in Africa will be conducted with increased joint planning and coordination. Advocacy, policy, regulatory, legal and ethical aspects will be further harmonized, allowing more efficiency. This platform is being constructed under the aegis of the AAVP.

"Since 2000, AAVP has been actively promoting the development of HIV vaccines suitable for use in Africa. Much progress has been made since then in key areas for conducting HIV vaccine research in Africa where an effective HIV vaccine would have tremendous benefit," said Dr Marie-Paule Kieny, Director, World Health Organization Initiative for Vaccine Research.

About 300 HIV vaccine stakeholders, including leading African and international scientists, research agencies, donors, and government and regional organization officials are participating in the meeting. Ms Janet Museveni, First Lady of Uganda and Ms Jeannette Kagame, First Lady of Rwanda and AAVP High Representative, as well as Ugandan Ministers Dr Steven Malinga and Beatrice Wabudaya will be addressing Forum participants in support of HIV vaccine related research and the critical role of the newly invigorated, Africa-based AAVP.

Forum participants will be briefed about the:

- state of the field of HIV vaccine research and development and strategic plans for future work, in alignment with the Global HIV Vaccine Enterprise;

- results of the largest ever HIV vaccine clinical trial in Thailand and what these mean for Africa;
- non-vaccination based avenues of HIV prevention research including microbicides and male circumcision, and use of partially effective health interventions; and
- key components of and challenges related to operationalizing a common platform for research in Africa, as the AAVP transitions to Africa.

A special roundtable discussion session will focus on advocacy with the participation of Dr Mallinga and First Ladies Museveni and Kagame.

At the end of the three-day meeting, the group is expected to issue a set of recommendations and make a call for action covering policy, advocacy and political issues, ethical, regulatory and legal requirements and the development of research sites and laboratory capacity.

Last month, the 2009 UNAIDS/WHO AIDS Epidemic Update was published with data showing a new trend: the number of new HIV infections in sub-Saharan Africa in 2008 was 400,000 less than it was in 2001, at the signing of the United Nations Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS.

"Despite this encouraging 15% decline in new infections over eight years, HIV prevalence is expected to continue to rise in coming years in sub-Saharan Africa and globally," said Catherine Hankins, Chief Scientific Adviser to UNAIDS. "The importance of intensified HIV prevention is underscored by the findings in 2008 that for every two people newly placed on antiretroviral treatment, a further five became newly infected with the virus," she said.

The Forum is sponsored by the following: World Health Organization, UNAIDS, Global HIV Vaccine Enterprise, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, United States National Institutes of Health, United States Walter Reed Military HIV Vaccine Research Programme, Canadian HIV Vaccine Initiative, International AIDS Vaccine Initiative, Wellcome Trust and Karolinska Institute of Sweden.

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