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Press release

HIV Vaccine development in Nigeria: need for dedicated action

Lagos/Nigeria. 18 May 2017. This year marks the 20th anniversary of hope and inspiration for the development of an HIV vaccine. Although we do not have an HIV vaccine, the field has indeed gone far with efforts to develop one.

In 2016, a large HIV vaccine efficacy clinical trial known as HVTN 702 started in South Africa, and later this year another one, testing a different product, is expected to start in several African countries. It will be the first time in nearly a decade that two HIV vaccine efficacy trials (large studies to see if a product works to prevent HIV in real life settings) are running simultaneously.

We know that vaccine research is always a long-term endeavor. Many of the vaccines we have today for other diseases took decades to develop. The discovery of the polio vaccine, for example, took 47 years.

We also acknowledge at this point in history, the dramatic success in increasing coverage of HIV treatment, care and existing prevention options. If coverage of prevention and treatment expands, new HIV infections and deaths from AIDS will continue to decrease. Available prevention options include the male and female condoms, prompt detection and treatment of sexually transmitted infections, male medical circumcision, post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP), pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and HIV treatment with antiretroviral drugs.

Many of today's HIV biomedical prevention methods require daily use or adherence to medications. Sustaining progress in bending the curve of the epidemic downwards will most likely depend on finding new tools that can provide long-lasting protection, and can be used in combination with available options.

An HIV vaccine would be an important part of such a comprehensive, integrated and sustained HIV prevention strategy.

HIV vaccine researchers are building on lessons from three decades of vaccine research, as well as the large body of research that led to the discovery of the HIV treatments in use today. They are also learning from studies with broadly neutralizing antibodies (bNAbs), molecules that can neutralize many strains of the virus. One large trial currently underway is testing if giving direct bNAb infusions of bNAbs into the bloodstream (a drip) can prevent HIV. All these trials are drawing us ever closer to a licensable vaccine. They are also providing insights for the HIV cure research field.

Developing an HIV vaccine is not easy or cheap, but it promises huge dividends to individuals, communities, nations, and the world. Success depends on keeping up the momentum, working together, and sustaining financial support. We can't afford to slow down promising and urgently needed research.

For Nigeria, the engagement of the Government is crucial and critical. While global efforts at developing an HIV vaccine are focused on ensuring that any vaccine developed can be used universally, we are aware that the HIV vaccine candidate products currently being tested do not address the circulating HIV strain in Nigeria. The National Agency

for the Control of AIDS is aware of this. The Nigeria Institute of Medical Research is planning to take proactive action in this respect and seek for international collaborative efforts to address this prospective challenge. The National Agency for the Control of AIDS has also developed a national roadmap for HIV Vaccine development in Nigeria. We have scientists in Nigeria – Dr Alash’le Abimiku of the Institute of Human Virology, Nigeria and Dr Simon Agwale of Innovative Biotech Nigeria and the USA – who are dedicated to research for a HIV vaccine that addresses the needs of Nigerians. Regulatory capacities are being built to address HIV vaccine development and licensure in Nigeria. These efforts are all applauded but we need more.

We need to start implementing the developed roadmap. We need to conduct operational and implementation research that would address the potential barriers to HIV vaccine access in Nigeria. The HIV vaccine demonstration project conducted by the Institute of Human Virology was a process towards achieving this. As a country, we need to translate the lessons learnt. We need to promote community education and awareness about ongoing efforts in the field; and start to promote community support for an HIV vaccine to be developed and/or tested in Nigeria in the future.

We cannot afford delays. Over 3 million people in Nigeria are living with HIV. Every new infection has social and economic consequences for the country. An HIV vaccine would reduce the number of new infections drastically. This is why support for HIV vaccine development is critical for our country.

Enabling every single Nigerian to have access to current HIV prevention tools is equally very important. As we work towards an AIDS free generation by 2030, NHVMAS and its allies and partners in Nigeria – Civil Society on HIV and AIDS in Nigeria (CISHAN), Treatment Advocacy Movement (TAM) and Network of People Living with HIV and AIDS in Nigeria (NEPWHAN) – push for a generation in Nigeria that is free from new HIV infections. Jointly, we support national and global efforts to ensure the smooth development, testing and eventual rollout of a safe, effective, licensed and widely accessible HIV vaccine.

NHVMAS's goal is to see the creation of a conducive environment that supports HIV related research in Nigeria. It works through advocacy for the creation of national policies and programmes that promotes ethical conduct of research in Nigeria.



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