

Novartis supports pan-African meeting to move faster to malaria elimination



Photo credit: James Gathany, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Malaria experts from over 35 African countries came together recently at Novartis's 14th annual National Malaria Control Programme (NMCP) Best Practice Sharing Workshop to discuss the need for new innovative tools and strategies to achieve malaria elimination.

'This discussion could not have come at a better time since we in the Southern African Development Community region are already advanced in the elimination programme having earmarked eight countries in this region as pilots for the elimination campaign,' said Hon. Dr. Nazira Abdula, Minister for Health, Mozambique.



Dr. Linus Igwezezie, Head of the Novartis Malaria Initiative

The three-day workshop with support from international organisations including the World Health Organization (WHO), The Global Fund to Fight

Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and the Malaria Consortium, focused on the new WHO 'Global Technical Strategy and Targets for Malaria 2016 – 2030', which aims to accelerate progress in the fight against malaria. The NMCP heads discussed the advances in technology made to date and how these tools can be implemented and improved to achieve the new WHO objective of 90% reduction in malaria cases and mortality rates by 2030.

'Novartis is proud to provide this unique platform,' said Dr. Linus Igwezezie, Head of the Novartis Malaria Initiative. 'These meetings have been designed for NMCP members by NCMP members, to develop new ideas and strategies to achieve elimination of this deadly disease.'

The NMCP meeting comes as the world has reached a critical juncture in the fight against malaria. Malaria mortality rates have fallen by 47% globally since 2001 and this has helped the malaria community gain growing momentum to realise that elimination is possible. Yet, new threats such as inadequate funding, the first signs of drug resistance, and the advance of diseases such as Ebola, could derail efforts unless addressed.

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Fountain Africa partner to launch midwives

programme in Bungoma

Airtel Kenya has partnered with Fountain Africa Trust to launch a community midwives programme to support expectant women, new mothers and newborns in Bungoma County, Kenya.

The programme offers free calling and sms service to 57 midwives and staff from Fountain Africa Trust, that will enable sharing of information and learning experiences between Bungoma County mothers, themselves, and the County ministry of health officials.

Airtel will also offer 24-hour free internet connectivity for Fountain Africa Trust, giving them unlimited access to online information that will help them carry out their programme effectively and interact with other midwives across the globe.

In a statement, Airtel Kenya CEO Adil El Youssefi said that the company is helping the government attain its Millennium Development Goals 4 and 5 by enabling the midwives to communicate effectively for free, especially when they are faced with emergencies.

UNAIDS welcomes evidence that starting ART early saves lives

UNAIDS welcomes additional evidence that starting antiretroviral therapy (ART) at a higher CD4 level has a positive effect on the health and wellbeing of people living with HIV.

'Every person living with HIV should have immediate access to life-saving antiretroviral therapy,' said Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS. 'Delaying access to HIV treatment under any pretext is denying the right to health.'

The National Institutes of Health-funded international randomised clinical trial START (Strategic Timing of Antiretroviral Treatment) has found evidence that the benefits of immediately starting ART outweigh the risks.

The START announcement follows a series of research findings over the past several years indicating the health benefits of starting HIV treatment earlier. The findings from these studies will play an important role in shaping the new treatment guidance from the World Health Organization due to be released later in 2015.

Ghana halts Ebola vaccine trial

Ghana has halted a plan to test two Ebola vaccines in an eastern town after legislators backed local protests against the trials sparked by fears of contamination, officials said.

The country's Food and Drugs Authority said it had begun enlisting volunteers in Hohoe in the Volta region to be injected with drugs made by Johnson & Johnson and Bavarian Nordic as part of a global Ebola vaccine drive.

Youth leaders threatened to boycott the programme.

Ebola has killed more than 11 000 people in Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia since it began more than a year ago, but new cases have declined sharply. Ghana has yet to record a case.

'The health minister has suspended the trials indefinitely because the people said they don't want it,' Health Ministry spokesman Tony Goodman said.

Women and girls in Africa 'being left behind' in fight against HIV/AIDS

Young women and adolescent girls in Africa 'are still being left behind' in the fight against HIV/AIDS, according to a new joint report from the United Nations (UN) and the African Union.

In the sub-Saharan region, AIDS-related illnesses remain the leading cause of death among girls and women of reproductive age.

In order to guide regional and global advocacy, and inform political dialogue on HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment among young women and adolescent girls, UNAIDS and the African Union have launched a joint report entitled, 'Empower young women and adolescent girls: Fast-tracking the end of the AIDS epidemic in Africa'.

The document outlines three political commitments to advance the rights and empowerment of Africa's young women and girls.

The commitments are to stop new HIV/AIDS infections among young women and adolescent girls in order to ensure that AIDS is no longer the leading cause of death among adolescents; to empower young women and adolescent girls through comprehensive sexuality education; and to prevent HIV infections among children and keep their mothers alive.

Physicians and veterinarians must work together to combat health threats, says WMA leader

Dr. Xavier Deau, President of the World Medical Association (WMA), has called for an integrated approach by physicians and veterinarians to combat different types of health threats.

Speaking at a One Health conference in Madrid, organised by the WMA and the World Veterinary Association, in collaboration with the Spanish medical and veterinary associations, Dr. Deau said the world urgently needed such an approach to combat an increasing amount of antimicrobial resistance, but also the threat from re-emerging infections.

He said that human health, animal health, and the ecosystems were interlinked and it needed a coordinated, multidisciplinary approach to address risks that merged at the animal-human-ecosystems interface.

'There is a commonly shared concern

that as cross-border human, animal, food and seeds mobility increases, so does the threat of the spread of dangerous pathogens and infectious diseases. More education and more training for the next generation of experts are required. We also need a framework for information-sharing to detect and fill knowledge gaps, and to strengthen inter-disciplinary cooperation.'

Dr. Deau added: 'Our key objectives should be to promote a cross-disciplinary and collaborative approach in order to improve human health and animal well-being. We need to foster scientific research on zoonosis and vector-borne infectious disease. We also must create synergies and facilitate the sharing of data between researchers. And it is important that new scientific findings should be disseminated and translated to anyone who might benefit from them.'

Food and Drug Administration approval needed for HIV drug

ViiV Healthcare, Aurobindo Pharma, and the Clinton Health Access Initiative, Inc. (CHAI) are working together to get dolutegravir 50mg approved by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for the treatment of HIV.

This is the first Abbreviated New Drug Application (ANDA) for a generic version of dolutegravir, less than two years after FDA approval of Tivicay® (dolutegravir) for sale in the US.

Upon receiving Tentative Approval from the FDA, Aurobindo Pharma will be able to supply dolutegravir 50mg via the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) programme, following completion of required local regulatory approval process, in the licensed countries outside of the US, as per the agreement signed between Aurobindo Pharma and ViiV Healthcare in 2014.

This submission comes less than five years after ViiV Healthcare and CHAI signed an agreement to collaborate with the goal of bringing innovative formulations of medicines for the treatment and prevention of HIV/AIDS to

people in developing countries, on an affordable yet sustainable basis.

Dr. Dominique Limet, CEO, ViiV Healthcare, said: 'This first ANDA for a generic dolutegravir confirms that our strong commitment to thinking and acting differently to pursue new ways to expand access to our medicines, for people living with HIV in countries where the need is most pressing, is working.'

David Ripin, PhD, Executive Vice President, and Chief Scientific Officer, CHAI, said: 'UNAIDS has set global public health goals calling for 90% of those who are HIV-positive to know their status, 90% of those identified to be linked to treatment programmes, and 90% of those in treatment to achieve undetectable viral load. To tackle these complex challenges, targeted efforts to facilitate access to HIV treatment medicines, such as dolutegravir, are needed.'

Mr. N. Govindarajan, Managing Director, Aurobindo Pharma, said: 'We are pleased to be part of this innovative partnership designed to accelerate access to medicines for treating HIV.'

New app for testing eyesight is as effective as optician's test

A smartphone app is as effective at testing eyesight as an optician's clinic, a trial suggests.

The team, at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, hope it can transform eye care for millions of people in remote parts of the world.

Trials on 233 people in Kenya, published in *JAMA Ophthalmology*, showed the phone produces the same results as eye charts.

It is often easy to treat with something as simple as a pair of glasses or cataract surgery, but a lot of people are beyond the reach of even the basis eye exam.

The team in London, with colleagues from Scotland, modified a smartphone to develop a series of eye tests that could be used with little training and were easily portable.

The Portable Eye Examination Kit (Peek) uses the phone's camera to scan the lens of the eye for cataracts.

Its 'Acuity App' uses a shrinking letter, which appears on screen, and is used as a basic vision test. It uses the camera's flash to illuminate the back of the eye to check for disease.

The first clinical data from tests in



Kenya show the vision test gives the same results as the rows of letters pinned to an optician's wall. Their eyes were examined both in their homes and at an eye clinic.

Dr. Andrew Bastawrous, who led the project, said: 'The main reason for most people not getting eye treatment is simply that they don't access the services and that's usually because the services are so far away from them or are unaffordable.

'If we can detect people with visual impairment much earlier on then we have a much greater chance of increasing awareness and ensuring they have appropriate treatment.

The phone is relatively cheap, costing around £300 rather than using bulky eye examination equipment costing in excess of £100,000.

The International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness believes the app could be a 'game changer'.

The Medicines Patent Pool releases 2014 annual report

The Medicines Patent Pool (MPP) released its 2014 annual report in May highlighting significant steps to increase access to World Health Organization (WHO)-recommended HIV medicines in low- and middle-income countries.

The MPP signed three licensing agreements and 17 sub-licensing agreements in 2014, and now holds licenses for 12 antiretrovirals (ARVs) from six patent holders.

Its generic partners have distributed 2.18 billion doses of HIV medicines in 117 countries to date. A United Nations-backed organisation, MPP published its annual 'report card' during the week of the 68th World Health Assembly.

'MPP plays a strong role in supporting overall global health objectives through voluntary licensing agreements that speed development of low-cost,

generic medicines to development countries,' said Greg Perry, Executive Director, MPP. 'Twenty Fourteen was a stellar year. We signed licenses with patent holders AbbVie, Gilead Sciences and ViiV Healthcare, and expanded our network of generic manufacturers to ten companies now working on more than 50 medicine development projects.'

MPP estimates that it has saved the international community \$79 million through discounted prices of HIV medicines and lower royalty payments, equivalent to one year of treatment for approximately 625,000 people living with HIV globally. Its efforts to spur generic competition for new ARVs could result in an additional 22 million patient-years of ARV treatment and generate between 1.18 billion and 1.4 billion in savings through 2028.

Germany to support Sierra Leone's health sector

The German Federal Ministry for Economic Co-operation and Development, is committing 22 million euro's to further boost Sierra Leone's health service delivery.

Director-General for German Federal Ministry for Economic Co-operation and Development, Gudrun Grosse Wiesmann disclosed this in a media briefing at the conference hall of the Ministry of Health and Sanitation, Youyi Building in Freetown.

Madam Wiesmann said that her government is increasing its involvement in the health sector in Africa, the reason being that most of the local health systems are often weak, coupled with the recent Ebola outbreak in West Africa.

She said the programme will be launched with bilateral development co-operation funds of up to 205 million euro's for the three affected West African states, for 2015/2016, and will focus on training, information campaigns, and equipment.

Rotary grants US\$40.3 million to eradicate polio worldwide

The continued fight to stamp out polio will receive an additional \$40.3 million boost from Rotary to support immunisation activities and research carried out by the Global Polio Eradication Initiative.

The funding comes at a critical time as Nigeria, the last polio-endemic country in Africa, approaches one-year since its last case of polio. If the current progress continues, the World Health Organization may remove Nigeria from the list of polio-endemic countries as early as September. In addition to the notable progress in Nigeria, no new cases of polio have been reported anywhere in Africa since August 2014.

Experts do, however, strongly caution that it is too soon to fully celebrate. Nigeria needs to go an additional two years without polio to be certified polio-free. Funding and support for high-quality immunisation campaigns and surveillance activities will be key to sustaining current gains.

'We are closer than we've ever been to wiping out polio,' said Mike McGovern, chair of Rotary's International PolioPlus Committee.

Photo from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news>

Philips transforms Intensive Care Unit in Kenyan hospital

Philips have unveiled an entirely refurbished Intensive Care Unit (ICU) at Machakos Hospital, Kenya.

This is the first of eleven ICU departments in hospitals across the country that Philips is transforming as part of a tender contract awarded to Philips by the Central Government of Kenya to support healthcare revitalisation across the country.

Philips has adopted an approach known as Managed Equipment Services (MES). This approach means that Philips has taken full responsibility for the entire renovation, and has sourced and provided all required facilities, not just the technology and equipment. This also included working with external third parties to deliver all necessary solutions for a world-class ICU.



New formulation of HIV treatment to save children's lives

Children affected by HIV/AIDS will benefit from the decision by the United States Food and Drug Administration to grant approval to a new antiretroviral formulation that can be mixed with food to make it easier for children living with HIV to take the life-saving medicines, UNAIDS and UNICEF have said.

'Treatment innovations such as this that replace unpleasant and bad tasting medicines are a real breakthrough, accelerating access to treatment for children and keeping our youngest healthy,' said Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS. 'It is unacceptable that only 24% of children living with HIV have access to antiretroviral medicines.'

The oral tablets contain an antiretroviral formulation of lopinavir and ritonavir. The treatment is heat stable and more palatable than medicines currently available.

From Abidjan to Addis: Delivering in 2015 for Africa

A new funding plan to deliver basic health and education for everyone is essential to end extreme poverty, according to The ONE Campaign's DATA Report 2015: 'Putting the Poorest First', which was in Abidjan, in the margins of the African Development Bank Group Annual Meetings.

ONE's analysis shows that development partners are missing their targets and financial support for the least developed countries (LDCs) continues to fall. Although LDCs are increasingly home to those who live on less than \$1.25 a day, they received less than a third of aid in 2014. Had that share been increased to 50%, an additional \$26.5 billion would have been available to those who need it most.

ONE is calling for better-targeted development assistance to be coupled with increased domestic revenues from developing countries' own governments to fund access to basic social services for everyone by 2020.

Investments in agriculture and energy are essential, along with action to clamp down on corruption, curb illicit financial flows, and drive up transparency so citizens can follow the money from resources to results.

Dr. Siphosiso Moyo, ONE's Africa Executive Director, said: 'More than two-thirds of the least developed countries are in Africa; these countries bear a growing share of the world's extreme poor. Decisions taken this year could be transformative for them and shape the course of history.'

The DATA report sets out a five-point plan for the world's poorest to be agreed at the pivotal Financing for Development conference (held this month), which must include access to basic service, increased domestic government revenues, development assistance where it is most needed, sustainable inclusive growth, and strong accountability through a data revolution to ensure that commitments are followed through.

The WHO calls on Africa to increase investment in health systems

The World Health Organization (WHO) has called on African governments



to invest more into improving health systems in order to improve the quality of healthcare services.

The WHO Director for Africa Matshidiso Moeti, who was on a three-day visit to Zambia, said that funding to health systems in Africa is still below the required threshold, adding that both national governments and cooperating partners should ensure that this is increased.

'Africa is facing challenges in dealing with communicable diseases and in recent years, we have seen the emergence of non-communicable diseases and this requires improved healthcare systems. But unfortunately, health care

systems are still under-funded in many countries,' she said.

She also said that The United Nations health agency has come up with guidelines that countries could use to embrace herbal medicines so that medicines are integrated in national healthcare delivery systems.

Meanwhile, WHO has committed itself to continue helping Zambia improve its healthcare delivery system. She said the two parties agreed to work on a partnership that will ensure universal healthcare coverage throughout the country by training more healthcare workers, ensuring sustained provision of medicines, and building infrastructure.

'Zambia still has a big gap in healthcare delivery systems and we agreed that we need to work together to improve the situation. The WHO is committed to help Zambia improve its healthcare system,' she said.

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Spike in West Africa Ebola cases shows need to address underlying healthcare needs



Back in May this year, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported a substantial increase in the weekly total of new Ebola cases in both Guinea and Sierra Leone, and responded by deploying a response team.

This comes in the shadow of the success in Liberia that was proclaimed to be Ebola-free in May, (but they experienced further localised cases in June) the result of a comprehensive response by President Barack Obama and his administration to invest in Liberia's healthcare infrastructure.

The US provided personal protective equipment, funded and trained medical workers, deployed laboratories, supported disease tracing, and started a large-scale social messaging campaign to inform Liberians about practices to protect themselves from infection.

The lesson from West Africa is clear: For their own safety and for the long-term stability of the African economy they need to assist with investments in healthcare infrastructure of West Africa - from hospitals and clinics to medication and vaccines and training doctors and nurses.

With more than 26 000 reported cases of infection and more than 10 000 recorded deaths, the crisis has been the largest and most geographically widespread outbreak of Ebola ever recorded. Beyond its devastating death, the crisis devastated the region's economy.

In March, the United Nations reported that West Africa, as a whole, may lose an average of at least \$3.6 billion per year through 2017 due to a decrease in trade, closing of borders, flight cancellations, and reduced foreign direct investment and tourism.

Rainy season is hampering Ebola response in West Africa

The United Nations (UN) and the World Health Organization (WHO) reported an increase in the intensity and geographic area of Ebola transmission in Guinea and Sierra Leone.

They warned that the onset of the rainy season 'from now onwards' will make field operations more difficult, and noted that community engagement remains a challenge in both countries.

Meanwhile, Peter Graaff, the Acting Special Representative and head of the UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response said the rainy season 'makes things more complicated because for the time being, people showing those symptoms have to be dealt with as if they are potentially Ebola patients, therefore have to be tested'.

As a consequence, he warned that the number of people to be tested for Ebola would go up dramatically over the next few weeks.

As this issue of *Africa Health* went to print, new cases were continuing to be reported from four prefectures

of Guinea and three districts of Sierra Leone, and several cases in both countries arose from unknown sources of infection in areas that have not reported confirmed cases for several weeks, indicating that chains of transmission continue to go undetected, according to WHO.

'Rigorous contact tracing, active case finding, and infection prevention and control must be maintained at current intensive levels in order to uncover and break every chain of transmission,' it said. 'However, the onset of the rainy season will make field operations more difficult from now onwards.'

The WHO also reported that response efforts have been complicated by active and passive resistance from communities in Guinea and also Sierra Leone.

'Community engagement has continued to be challenging in several chiefdoms in Kambia, with UNICEF reporting a large number of incidents of resistance to response measures in the district,' according to the update.

Photo credit: Dr. Heidi Soeters, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's team member and EIS Officer

State of the art cancer treatment available in Namibia

Namibian cancer patients requiring specialised radiation therapy will no longer have to travel to South Africa for their treatment, with the opening of the new Namibian Oncology Centre equipped with the country's first Elekta digital linear accelerator.

The private Namibian Oncology Centre is set to open in Windhoek later this year. Built and equipped with funding from Spitz Healthcare Investments, the centre will have chemotherapy, laboratory, pharmacy and inpatient facilities, as well as the first digital linear accelerator radiation treatment in Namibia.

The centre's radiation unit, with the capacity to treat up to 50 patients a day, will bring to Namibia highly specialised treatment. The only other radiation treatment available in Namibia is at the state hospital in Windhoek, which uses an older, cobalt radiation unit.

A team of specialists are in place to man the new centre. One of the team's oncologists, Dr. Elré van Heerden, notes that the benefits of the new unit

will extend to patients beyond Namibia's borders, as a number of private patients from Angola are also expected to seek treatment at the facility.

Dr. van Heerden believes this is a key benefit of the new Elekta linear accelerator and advanced treatment planning capability. 'This equipment allows for highly targeted radiation treatment with limited damage to healthy tissue. This is crucial in curative treatment in particular, because with the ability to cure more patients, we need to ensure the treatment has as little long-term impact on healthy tissue as possible.'

Martin Noordman, service partner manager for sub-Saharan Africa at Elekta South Africa said the arrival of Elekta's highly advanced linear accelerator in Namibia could ease the burden on the state's oncology facility through a possible public-private partnership in future, as well as delivering a number of benefits to private patients who previously might have had to travel for specialised treatment.