

G-8 endorses new global HIV vaccine enterprise

The formation of a new global consortium to streamline research and development efforts to accelerate progress towards an HIV vaccine was announced by G-8 countries during their annual summit which took place in the US state of Georgia in June — an initiative welcomed by WHO and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS).

The plan — endorsed by Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Russian Federation, the UK and the US — calls for the establishment of HIV vaccine development centres throughout the world, the expansion of manufacturing capabilities, the creation of standardized measurement systems, the construction of clinics for trials and the creation of rules allowing regulatory authorities in different countries to recognize the results of foreign clinical trials.

“I welcome the G-8’s political endorsement of this initiative,” said WHO Director-General, Dr LEE Jong-wook. “The Global HIV Vaccine Enterprise will bring a new political and financial dimension to addressing the complex challenge of developing a safe and effective HIV/AIDS vaccine.”

According to WHO, HIV/AIDS vaccine development has been slow mainly due to “enormous” scientific, logistical and financial hurdles. Since the discovery of HIV as the cause of AIDS in 1983–84, numerous vaccine candidates have been tested in more than 70 human clinical trials but with moderate success. So far, only one vaccine candidate has concluded the stage of definitive trials but it did not show any noticeable level of efficacy.

The Global HIV Vaccine Enterprise aims to enhance coordination, information sharing and global collaboration amongst the world’s HIV vaccine researchers in industrialized and developing countries in both private and public sectors. The initiative will prioritize the scientific challenges that need to be overcome, coordinate product development efforts and encourage greater use of information sharing technologies.

According to WHO, this would mean that existing resources would be better aligned and could be channelled more efficiently. It is hoped that the plan will also encourage more effective synergies between research efforts and global preventative and therapeutic efforts.

“AIDS has always challenged us to do business differently, and this is no less true with the development of a vaccine,” said UNAIDS Executive Director, Dr Peter Piot. “The G8’s endorsement of the Global HIV Vaccine Enterprise is a vital boost to help it forge the strategic planning, collaboration, and global investment of resources by governments and industry that is commensurate with the intensive effort required to develop a globally accessible and affordable HIV vaccine.”

Partners in the enterprise include the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Vaccine Research Centre in the US, the European Research Institutes, the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative, European Union and national HIV vaccine programmes and research institutions from developing countries.

More information about the programme is available from the UNAIDS website: www.unaids.org ■

Polio case in Darfur sparks fears of epidemic in west and central Africa

West and central Africa are on the verge of the largest polio epidemic in recent years, warned experts from the Global Polio Eradication Initiative. The warning followed a confirmation on 22 June that a child was paralysed on 20 May by polio in the Darfur region of the Republic of Sudan, a country which has not seen the disease for more than three years.

“There is no question that the virus is spreading at an alarming pace,” said Dr David Heymann, WHO Representative for Polio Eradication. “The fact that the Sudan is now re-infected is concrete evidence of the need to support a massive immunization response right across west and central Africa.”

Epidemiologists said that the polio-virus in the Sudan shares close genetic

links to the virus in northern Nigeria, which has spread through Chad in recent months. According to Heymann, the re-infection of the Sudan represents the latest setback to progress made towards achieving polio eradication in Africa.

“At the beginning of 2003, only two countries in sub-Saharan Africa were polio-endemic. Today, however, Africa accounts for nearly 90% of the global polio burden, with children now paralysed in ten previously polio-free countries across the continent,” said Heymann.

Children in west and central African countries will be particularly vulnerable during the polio “high season” this autumn when experts fear a major epidemic. Less than half of children in the region are routinely immunized against polio. Experts from the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, spearheaded by WHO, Rotary International, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), recommended synchronized immunization campaigns across 22 African countries in October and November 2004 to reach 74 million children.

“These campaigns could avert a public health tragedy,” said Carol Bellamy, UNICEF Executive Director. “But to be effective they must have strong, grass-roots support. The first priority should be to increase community participation in polio activities throughout the region.”

The northern Nigerian state of Kano is the epicentre of the region’s outbreak, resulting in part from a local controversy over the safety of the polio vaccine which had led to the suspension of immunization campaigns earlier in the year. Following an announcement by Kano state authorities in May 2004, however, it is hoped that polio immunization activities in the state will soon recommence. Despite the statement, the local community still needs reassurance, said Bellamy.

According to WHO, responding to this looming epidemic will require an additional US\$ 100 million, of which US\$ 25 million is urgently required by August for the first campaign. ■