



PHOTO: IAS CARE

Village women in India holding AIDS vaccine trial kits provided by the International Aids Vaccine Initiative.

# AIDS vaccine breakthrough

## OFID supports clinical trials

In furtherance of its mission to fight the global AIDS pandemic, OFID in December pledged its support to the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative (IAVI).

An OFID grant of US\$3.5 million will bolster IAVI's research and development program, as it works to develop a vaccine to limit further transmission of the virus.



**S**ince the initial identification by scientists of HIV as the cause of AIDS, the relentless spread of the disease has transformed it into the worst recorded pandemic in human history. While billions of dollars have been poured into initiatives that seek to halt transmission by raising awareness of protection methods, for example, IAVI is the only global organization dedicated exclusively to developing an effective AIDS vaccine.

According to Dr. Seth Berkley, President and CEO of IAVI, the severity of the pandemic is such that it is vital to look beyond temporary, stop-gap measures: “The world is unfortunately focused on short-term issues, and in this case it is an emergency and rightfully so, yet we must focus on the long-term issues. Short-term interventions do not work, so the question is how to balance our efforts, recognizing the long-term issues as well.”

The OFID grant comes at a crucial point in IAVI’s research, coinciding with the announcement of modest achievements in Phase II of the Initiative’s clinical trials. Says Berkley: “This small success can only mean positive results.”

IAVI was born out of discussions stemming from a meeting of the Rockefeller Foundation with 24 authorities on the disease in Bellagio, Italy, a decade after HIV was identified. The initiative was formally launched at the start of 1996, as a non-profit public-private product development partnership. Its first challenge was to make AIDS vaccine development a priority on the global public health agenda. Today, IAVI has a strong network of research center and operates in 25 countries worldwide, many of them functioning as regional hubs.

IAVI’s chief hub is its clinical research center in Kenya, where a high incidence was discovered of women who were exposed to the virus yet remained uninfected. Scientists began to study the type of immune responses these women had and recreate it via a vaccine. These



PHOTO: AGNIES NIEBHAY

Dr. Seth Berkley, President and CEO of IAVI with OFID Director-General Al-Herbish.

findings led to trials being conducted in Nairobi and the creation of a Kenya AIDS Vaccine Initiative (KAVI). IAVI launched its first vaccine development partnership in 1998 with KAVI and has since conducted six HIV vaccine clinical trials and seven epidemiology studies. The OFID grant will target further study on identifying the relevant antibodies with a view to eventually providing protection before exposure.

In parallel to the Kenyan efforts, IAVI began work in India in 2000 after signing a memorandum of understanding with the Indian Ministry of Health ►

*Achievements in clinical trials have raised hopes that progress is being made in identifying antibodies that could form the basis of a vaccine against the HIV virus.*



PHOTO: VANESSA VICK, COURTESY OF IAVI

◀ and Family Welfare. IAVI believes India to be a strong partner because of its rich pool of medical professionals and scientists together with a successful pharmaceutical industry. Its potential in playing a leading role in the AIDS vaccine research and development pushed IAVI to activate its efforts in the country in 2001.

In its global efforts IAVI has created a broad program that covers technical capacity-building, reaching out to the local communities, advocacy and political engagement. IAVI believes that these elements together form the foundations for creating the long-term solution necessary for eradicating the epidemic.

High-level political support and sound policy are also essential to the sustainability of the AIDS vaccine ef-

fort. With this in mind, IAVI systematically cultivates and sustains such support in its worldwide initiative. Dr. Berkley considers the sustainability of political support to be an essential aspect for the success of any trial: “In the end, bad science will destroy a trial, but so will bad politics or misunderstandings,” he states.

Another integral part of the trial is IAVI’s strong emphasis on reaching out to the community. Much of IAVI’s activities in each country are followed with thorough attention to different religious and cultural community groups and strong collaboration on the specific needs of each community. What makes IAVI’s work so valuable is the strong ethical human research component in conducting its trials. IAVI believes that relying on community relationships allows

for a deeper understanding of the limitations, one of which is cost: for every two people put on treatment, another five infections go untreated.

IAVI understands that community bind is critical and requires layers of support. One of the main areas IAVI focuses on is women and their participation in the clinical trials. Due to gender constraints in many of the communities it operates in, IAVI pays special attention to all elements that are gender specified, allowing for access to specific needs, from counselling, to medical care and advocacy in relation to stigmatization.

One of the major trends in IAVI's programs in Asia and Africa is the small number of women enrolments due to constraints such as marital issues and pregnancy as well as cultural factors. A crucial element in the success of the trials to date is the considerable research into why women were not participating and the substantial efforts that followed to ensure their integration.

IAVI continues to work closely with communities on the ground to work around difficulties relevant to those communities. On the other hand, IAVI discovered that due to its standardized lab values and strong technical capacity building, the operations within Africa and India have an even better standard than in the west. "We need to know that a vaccine tested in Africa can be tested elsewhere," says Dr. Berkely.

OFID's grant will support IAVI's extensive research and development program in Africa and India. The IAVI/OFID partnership also includes capacity-building measures and provision of support to IAVI's highest-priority research program at its clinical research center in Kenya, under the Kenya AIDS Vaccine Initiative. At the signature of the grant agreement, Dr. Berkely expressed his appreciation of OFID's support to the initiative and stated that, "We will find a vaccine, not only for those communities, but for the whole world." ■

*The severity of the AIDS pandemic is such that it is vital to look beyond temporary, stop-gap measures. Short-term emergency needs need to be balanced with the pursuit of a long-term solution.*

## IAVI in brief

IAVI is a global non-profit organization working to speed the search for a vaccine to prevent HIV and AIDS. IAVI sponsors public-private research partnerships to build vaccine candidates and test them in humans. Following its official launch in 1996, and with the support of organizations and partner countries, IAVI helped build an advocacy initiative that resulted in the G8 issuing a "Call for Action" on HIV vaccines in 1997. The following year, the young product development partnership produced the first Scientific Blueprint for AIDS Vaccine Development, which called for greater international collaboration to fast-track the parallel development of multiple HIV vaccines, and for a stronger focus on vaccine candidates devised to combat strains of HIV circulating in Africa and Asia. IAVI also advocates on behalf of vaccine developers worldwide, and for public policies that assure accessibility.



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