



The Kenya AIDS Vaccine Initiative – Ten Years and Five Clinical Trials Later

NAIROBI 26 MARCH 2009—Since the diagnosis of the first HIV/AIDS case in Kenya in 1984, prevalence rates, which are an indicator of the percentage of the population that is infected with HIV, has grown at an alarming rate, and AIDS has reached epidemic levels in several parts of the country. In 1999, HIV and AIDS was declared “a national disaster” in the country. The same year, however, Kenya took its first step toward the search for a vaccine that could end the AIDS epidemic once and for all. With support from international partners, the Kenya AIDS Vaccine Initiative (KAVI) was formed at the University of Nairobi’s School of Medicine. KAVI was the first organization in the country dedicated to AIDS vaccine research.

KAVI is now a thriving research centre, with partners throughout the world. Since its founding in 1999 KAVI has conducted five clinical trials of AIDS vaccine candidates, including the first ever such trial to be conducted in the country, and several other non-clinical studies. This research has yielded important data that has helped inform the direction of HIV research and development, and brought the country international recognition as an important player in the global AIDS vaccine development effort.

In this period KAVI’s staff has grown from three to 54—including 11 trial physicians and eight laboratory technologists—who work out of two fully-equipped clinics and laboratories.

Although a vaccine against AIDS still eludes the world, Kenya is proud to claim an important place in helping to advance AIDS vaccine research efforts to date. And KAVI will continue to be fully involved in the design, development and testing of the next generation of AIDS vaccine candidates.

As we celebrate 10 years of KAVI’s existence, we are actively conducting several basic epidemiology studies that will help to inform the design of more promising vaccine candidates. For example, we are studying how the body initially responds to HIV so that we can find a way to contain the virus before it finds a permanent home in the body’s cells. We are also actively working to find individuals who possess broadly neutralizing antibodies against HIV. By identifying and studying these antibodies, our goal is to design a vaccine that can stimulate their production and block HIV infection completely. Finally, we are also closely evaluating the strains of HIV that are circulating in East Africa, to ensure that the vaccine candidates we develop are relevant for our populations.

In addition to the generous funding provided by the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative (IAVI) and the support from communities, KAVI is extremely grateful for all the individuals who have selflessly come forward to volunteer for KAVI’s research studies.

HIV today infects an estimated 33 million people globally, 22 million of them in sub-Saharan Africa. Kenya’s current prevalence of 7.4%, or 1.4 million persons aged 15-64 living with HIV,

is still unacceptably high, and the disease continues to impoverish individuals, families and the society in general.

Current HIV prevention methods are expected to lower the HIV infection rate over time, but they alone will not end the epidemic. History has taught us that prevention that relies on human behavior alone is unlikely to end a viral epidemic. Ultimately a preventive vaccine, used in combination with other prevention methods, remains the world's best hope of ending AIDS.

As KAVI turns 10, we re-affirm our belief, supported by scientific evidence, that an AIDS vaccine is possible. Important progress has been made toward its development, but there are still many challenges to overcome. Vaccines have historically taken decades to develop, and for a virus as complicated as HIV, an AIDS vaccine will likely be no different. We call on the government to strengthen its support and funding for clinical research in Kenya. In particular, the training of young scientists, who must pick up where the current generation of researchers leaves off, is critical to ensuring Kenya's involvement in future research.

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