

An international team of researchers headed by scientists from an American university wants to recruit 11,000 people, comprising all the villages in a particular region of a sub-Saharan African country for a five year study to test whether the spread of HIV can be slowed by treating an entire population for other sexually transmitted diseases. There is reason to believe this approach would be successful. Most AIDS researchers believe treating other sexually transmitted diseases, to cure sores, and reduce inflammation, can raise the body's barriers against HIV infection. The study the researchers what to conduct will evaluate a combination of oral antibiotics to cure gonorrhea, syphilis, and other sexually transmitted diseases. Several key drugs in the study, however, while affordable for the average person in North America, Western Europe, and other affluent areas of the globe, are, at this time, too costly for the average resident of the host country for the proposed study.

Should the host country allow the study to proceed? If so, then why, and under what conditions, if any? If not, why not?

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: The host country's principal responsibility is for the welfare of its own population. Its responsibilities with respect to the welfare of people in other countries consists only in not acting so as to harm them. For this reason, the host country has no moral obligation to allow the study to proceed unless doing so would, in some way, significantly benefit its people. Accordingly, the host country should try to determine whether the study can be organized to generate information relating not only to the study's principal hypothesis, which has little practical importance for the host country's population, but also to other matters that could be significant with respect to health conditions in the host country. If this can be done then the host country should allow the study to go forward. If it cannot then the host country probably should not allow the study, given the expenses in connection with it, which could be large for the host country, even if minimal for a wealthier country.

Case from the February 24, 1996 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl. Copyright Robert Ladenson, Center for the Study of Ethics at the Illinois Institute of Technology, 1996.