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Horizon

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Sixty prostitutes in Nairobi were involved in research studies

Aids vaccine ignites major controversy

HEALTH

By MIKE MWANIKI

The recent announcement that Kenyan researchers are involved in the development of a Sh300 million HIV/Aids trial vaccine has drawn mixed reactions.

Those against the new initiative say the Kenyan volunteers to be injected with the Aids virus stand a high chance of developing HIV.

In a letter that appeared in the mailbox recently, a Kenyan based in Boston, US, Mr Ibrahim Kagwima Mureu, said a renowned researcher in New England, Massachusetts, US, has raised concern about using inactivated HIV viruses as a vaccine.

"This kind of testing is outlawed here," he added.

But in a quick rejoinder, local University of Nairobi researchers involved in the project, led by Prof Ndinya Achola, refuted this assertion.

"The vaccine to be used is based on inactive (killed) or live Aids virus. It is based on small extracts of the virus. These portions are not infectious and they cannot revert to a live virus. This extract will, however, teach the body to recognise and kill the virus that causes Aids."

Majengo

Added the researchers: "The proposed vaccine, under development in Oxford University, UK, and as per recommendations of UNAids/WHO, will be first tried in the country of origin. It is only after it is found to be safe that it will be tried in Kenya."

Kenya and South Africa, the researchers noted, are not the only countries involved in the Aids vaccine evaluation trials. There are many other countries involved including Uganda, India, Thailand, US, Brazil and the UK.

"These trials, however, target HIV-1 subtypes that are not found in Kenya. We in Kenya need to develop a vaccine that specifically targets the virus that is commonly found among our population."

The researchers said their most important breakthrough in the fight against the pandemic was the discovery of heavily-exposed but uninfected group of commercial sex workers in

Nairobi's Majengo slums in 1985.

"The characterisation of this group of women has helped in the understanding of the body's immune response to HIV. This knowledge is the basis of the proposed vaccine," they added.

The researchers said the vaccine to be tried has undergone extensive animal studies and been shown to be safe and to stimulate the appropriate immune response. "This vaccine will be tried in humans in the UK before being tried in Kenya."

Study

According to the researchers, the design of the study will follow the laid out protocol for evaluation of new drugs and vaccines.

"The protocol will be evaluated by the Institutional Review Boards at Oxford University, Kenyatta National Hospital and University of Nairobi Ethical Review Committee, National Aids Control Programme Clinical Research Review team and the National Council for Science and Research.

"If the protocol is approved, an independent data and safety

is proven, it will be affordable and accessible to Kenyans and other persons in developing countries."

During the vaccine trial, the DMS added, Kenya will also benefit from:

- Training of scientists and researchers;
- Transfer of technology;
- Reduced cost of the vaccine;
- International recognition;
- Extension and uplifting of laboratory and office facilities.

The introduction of anti-HIV triple therapy in US and Europe, he said, had reduced HIV-associated deaths and ill health.

"However, these drugs are expensive and unavailable to the majority of Kenyans. There is, therefore, an urgent need for alternative strategies to supplement the currently available control and prevention measures to curtail the spread of the pandemic worldwide.

"One such strategy is the use of vaccines in the prevention of HIV infection," he explained.

Ethics

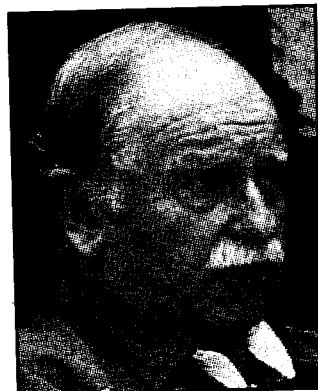
The chairman of the Medical Practitioners and Dentists Board, Dr Richard Baraza, supported the DMS and said the initiators of



Prof Julius Meme



Prof Arthur Obel



Dr Basil Wainwright

Doctors argue that the vaccine is based on a non-infectious virus which cannot revert to a live one; but others say the volunteers may develop the HIV virus

monitoring board will be set up to monitor participant safety. In other words, there will be no short-cuts in carrying out these trials."

Speaking during a workshop dubbed *HIV Vaccine Trials in Kenya* held recently at Nairobi's Mayfair Court Hotel, the Director of Medical Services, Prof Julius Meme, welcomed the new initiative.

"My ministry is happy to note that the International Aids Vaccine Initiative (IAVI) has developed mechanisms not only to support HIV vaccine development, but to also ensure that if the efficacy of the vaccine

the project were working closely with various professional bodies in the country in ensuring that all the necessary ethical and other procedures are strictly followed.

Speaking during the workshop, the Principal of the University of Nairobi's Medical School, Prof Samuel Sinei, said the project had followed the necessary procedures including involving the Ethical Committee Review Boards which had given the greenlight for the commencement of the project.

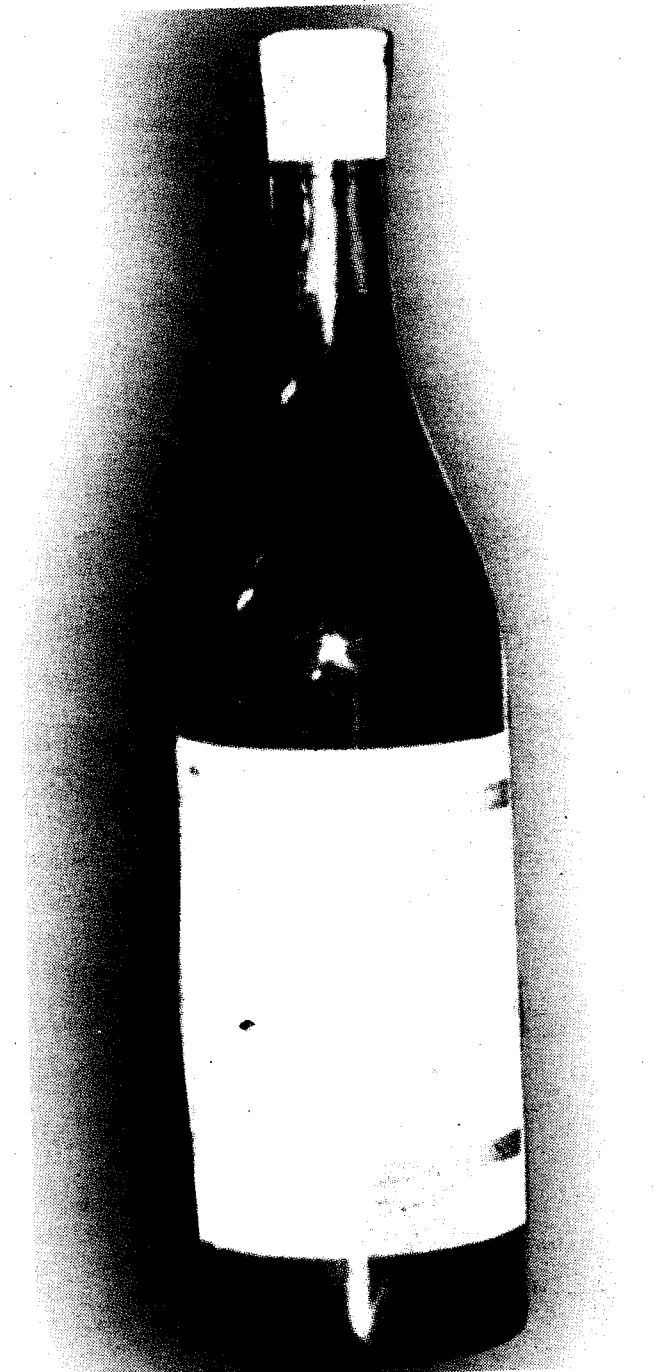
"The medical fraternity is happy to note that all (the) necessary scientific procedures followed prior to the

start of this project."

A similar venture involving South African researchers and US scientists, which is also funded by IAVI, is simultaneously being undertaken in South Africa.

Speaking during the Nairobi workshop, IAVI President Seth Berkley said pharmaceutical firms worldwide spent about \$20 billion (Sh1.2 trillion) annually in manufacturing Aids drugs with African countries spending about \$10 billion (Sh600 billion) to buy them.

Dr Berkley added: "Our goal is not only to ensure the development of an Aids vaccine as soon as possible but also to



Controversial Pearl Omega: The distinction of the new vaccine is that the initiators have involved government and medical agencies

make it accessible to anyone in the world that needs it."

Experts note that until now, most vaccine candidates have been produced from HIV strains prevalent in North America and Europe.

It is also noteworthy that 60 commercial sex workers in Nairobi have helped in the development of the HIV/Aids vaccine that is going on trial.

When all is said for or against the new initiative, the economic and social devastation that is being caused by the Aids pandemic to our society is mind-boggling.

Statistics show that more than 300,000 Kenyans have died from Aids since the first case was diagnosed in 1984, while 1.5 million others — 70 per cent of whom are aged between 18 and 25 years — are infected with the killer virus.

At the same time, experts say up to 50 and 60 per cent of beds in adult medical wards and 20 to 30 per cent of paediatric beds are occupied by patients with HIV-related illness.

The involvement by Kenyan researchers in the development of

the Sh300 million HIV/Aids trial vaccine is, therefore, a great contribution to the global efforts to find an answer to this rapidly spreading scourge.

Welcome

Though the researchers' encouraging initiative is welcome, the greater effort must go into the anti-Aids awareness campaign.

Unlike the previous announcements of undocumented and purported Aids cures and breakthroughs — Prof Obel's Pearl Omega, herbalist Dr Maingi's chameleon drug and more recently Dr Stone's — among others, at least the initiators of this new one seem to have involved the necessary government and other medical agencies in this venture.

The matter should therefore be given a chance for may be it might unravel or yield some new insights about the killer scourge which is a ticking time-bomb in the world's midst.