



News Release

New network will foster international scientific collaborations to fight viral disease in West Africa.

Network will strengthen viral surveillance capacity to fight ongoing epidemics such as polio and Lassa fever while protecting against an outbreak of pandemic influenza.

November 4th, 2008, ICAV 7th International Symposium, Beijing, China.

Representatives of various institutions and government agencies from West Africa, Europe, Australia, China and Canada assembled at the ICAV 7th International Symposium to sign a Memorandum of Understanding inaugurating the West African Viral Surveillance Network (WAVS).

Viral diseases infect about 5 million people a year in West Africa, impeding poverty reduction and sustainable development. The eradication of high-burden viral disease is integral to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations. Viral surveillance capacity in West Africa—the key to reducing prevalence of viral infection—remains weak. In addition to ongoing polio, Lassa, and West Nile epidemics, the highly pathogenic avian influenza virus H5N1 has recently become endemic in many countries in the region. As such, the UN has identified West Africa as a priority region for surveillance strengthening.

The WAVS network addresses gaps in the viral surveillance system by encouraging regional and international collaborations, and implementing targeted capacity and infrastructure projects. “WAVS will help us fill the gaps in our surveillance infrastructure”, noted Dr. Mike Ochoga, who coordinates the Avian Influenza Rapid Response Team at the Nigerian Federal Ministry of Health.

Increased surveillance provides information essential to rapid and effective disease management and control, the implementation of effective prevention, treatment, prophylaxis and vaccine deployment strategies, and design of new therapeutic leads. Surveillance is the cornerstone of an effective public health system. According to the ICAV Africa Regional Director, Dr. Oyekanmi Nash, “the surveillance gaps that the network had identified includes those on sample collection and referral systems, viral identification and analysis, and collaboration and coordination. WAVS addresses these gaps through focused activities with the identified regional and international collaborative scientists, institutions and organizations.”

“This MOU is a concrete step towards strengthening science and public health in West Africa through substantive international collaborations”, said Dr. Jeremy Carver, CEO of ICAV. “Strengthened surveillance in West Africa will not only directly lead to a reduction in loss of life, but will also produce information essential to developing effective new drugs.”

Professor Bamidele O. Solomon, the Director-General of the National Biotechnology Development Agency of the Nigerian Federal Government, hailed the establishment of WAVS as “a big step forward in strengthening existing linkages both inside and outside the country for something of great importance.”

WAVS builds on discussions that took place at the Abuja, Nigeria ICAV Symposium of May, 2007 and subsequent roundtable discussions with stakeholders. “Since the ICAV Abuja meeting,” Professor Sunday Omilabu, Dean of the Medical School of the University of Lagos, said, “things have really progressed with regards to information sharing and collaborative research projects. WAVS will build on this progress.”

The WAVS Network will bridge the gap between existing surveillance systems in the region. “The existing Polio surveillance network is very effective”, notes Professor Festus Adu of the WHO Polio Laboratory at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. “WAVS will aid in the transition of such networks to other diseases once we have reached our goal of polio eradication, leveraging existing capacity in the field.”

International Consortium on Anti-Virals (ICAV)

ICAV is at the centre of pandemic preparedness and global public health, developing urgently needed, low-cost anti-virals. A not-for-profit drug development organization, ICAV accelerates the discovery, development and delivery of novel anti-viral therapies for neglected and emerging diseases through the international collaboration of scientists, government and industry. ICAV harvests promising drug candidates for pre-clinical and clinical development from its international network of over 250 scientists from 24 countries. ICAV ensures global availability of anti-virals by offering therapies at cost or for free in lower- and middle-income countries.

ICAV 7th International Symposium “Challenging Pandemics: Science, Policy Preparedness”

Organized in conjunction with the Institute of Microbiology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the symposium gathered over 100 scientists, public health experts, industry representatives, and policymakers to advance the development of safe, affordable and effective anti-viral therapeutics for infectious diseases. The key objectives of the symposium are to identify promising new anti-viral development candidates and to foster new collaborations to accelerate the development of new therapeutics. The symposium featured sessions on Avian Influenza, Hepatitis, Dengue, enteroviruses, and traditional strategies for drug development. The symposium took place from November 1-4, 2008 at the Beijing Friendship Hotel in Beijing, China. The Chinese Minister of Health gave a keynote address at the Gala Dinner on October 31st.

Participating Institutions in MOU

National Biotechnology Development Agency, Federal Ministry of Science and Technology, Abuja, Nigeria; International Consortium on Anti-Virals; Federal Ministry of Health, Nigeria; University of Abuja, Nigeria; University of Lagos, Nigeria; Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research, Ghana; Institute for Glycomics, Griffith University, Queensland, Australia; Toronto General Research Institute, University Health Network/University of Toronto, Canada; Institute of Biochemistry, Center for Structural and Cell Biology in Medicine, University of Lubeck, Germany; WHO Polio Laboratory, College of Medicine, University of Ibadan, Nigeria, CNRS-University of Marseille, France, and Institute of Microbiology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, China