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Anti-viral group seeks new funding source after feds scrap plans for HIV vaccine facility

By Debbie Lawes

The International Consortium on Anti-Virals (ICAV) hopes to secure \$50 million under a new maternal and child health initiative which is expected to be the centerpiece of Canada's development assistance and a priority for this summer's G8 summit in Muskoka ON. The Trent Univ-based group has the backing of Peterborough Conservative MP Dean Del Mastro who is pushing to have the proposal tabled when G8 development ministers meet in Halifax April 26-28 to discuss an action plan in advance of the June summit.

ICAV was one of four finalists for a proposed \$88-million vaccine pilot manufacturing facility to produce experimental vaccines for clinical trials, funded by the Canadian government and the Bill and Belinda Gates Foundation. In early February, the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) told applicants that an internal review and an international expert panel review found that "none of the applicants were found to be successful in meeting the pre-established criteria."

The government subsequently announced February 19 that plans for the facility had been cancelled, based in part on an Oliver Wyman consulting report prepared for the Gates Foundation that concluded there is already sufficient vaccine manufacturing capacity in North America. The other three finalists were a consortium led by the International Centre for Infectious Diseases in Winnipeg, the Univ of Western Ontario and Laval Univ. But unlike the other applicants, ICAV's raison d'être depends on securing significant long-term funding.

Founded in 2004, ICAV works with an international network of over 250 scientists from 25 countries to take promising anti-viral compounds from proof-of-concept to animal model, in preparation for clinical trials. Under ICAV's intellectual property policy, a two-tier pricing approach is developed that would allow products to be available to lower- and middle-income countries at affordable prices.

ICAV's CEO and scientific director, Dr Jeremy Carver, says its technical review committee has approved for development over 35 anti-viral medicines for HIV, rotavirus and dengue virus, among others.

"What we've been doing all along is relevant to maternal and child health," says Carver. "If the Prime Minister wants to do something different at the G8 announcement, one of the things would be to celebrate our success as a global organization and help us accelerate the development of drugs against viruses that affect large numbers of children and lead to complications in childbirth because of the health of the mother."

ICAV's goal is to leverage \$50 million in Canadian funding with matching contributions from France and Germany to fund anti-viral research within their own countries as well as international collaborations. The German collaboration would be through ICAV Germany, which will be officially launched at ICAV's next international symposium in Lubeck, Germany in October.

The Peterborough group also has strong ties with France through board member Dr. Philippe Douste-Blazy, chair of the international drug purchasing facility (UNITAID) hosted by the World Health Organization. He held various cabinet positions in the French government and later served as a special advisor to French president Nicolas Sarkozy. Douste-Blazy was instrumental in lining up France as a funding partner in 2005 when ICAV tried unsuccessfully to secure matching contributions from the Canadian and provincial governments as part of a \$100-million collaboration with the Institute Pasteur in France (R\$, May 18/05).

"If Canada is interested in getting support from other G8 countries for this, we could bring pressure to bear from scientists ICAV has aligned with in those countries," adds Carver.

ICAV also has an MOU with five institutes in India, including the National Institute of Virology and the National AIDS Research Institute, to create ICAV India. Carver says the new group will approach the Indian government for funding. ICAV signed another MOU recently with the International Centre for Genomics and Biotechnology in Trieste, Italy. It also has an ICAV African Regional Office based in Nigeria.

In Canada, ICAV is affiliated with the Foundation on Anti-virals, founded by Dr Michel Chrétien, a senior scientist at the Ottawa Health Research Institute as well as co-founder and ICAV board member. The Montreal-based charitable foundation has received seed funding from the Quebec government and Montreal International with a goal is to raise \$100 million over five years to fund clinical trials that emerge from ICAV.

SUSTAINABLE FUNDING A CHALLENGE

ICAV has managed to attract some public funding, including \$4 million from PHAC and \$2 million from the Ontario Ministry of Research and Innovation which has allowed the organization to identify promising therapeutics.

Carver says they have since approached the province for an additional \$2 million to build facilities in Peterborough to create a technological platform for the production of biologics — vaccines and other therapeutics created by biological as opposed to chemical processes. ICAV plans to partner with firms in the US and Switzerland as part of the new initiative to significantly reduce the time it takes to produce biologics for clinical trials.

"We looked at infectious disease and said a year and a half to two years is way too long to respond in a pandemic situation," says Carver. "With this new platform, we're looking at going from a DNA sequence to a gram of protein in seven weeks. That would give us the ammunition to turn around and say this needs to be commercialized."

This month, ICAV won funding from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research to ramp up development of its lead drug candidate, "truly-human" monoclonal antibody (tHumAb), which treats patients who are severely ill with H1N1 — particularly those who are resistant to the Tamiflu anti-viral drug. CIHR will provide ICAV with a \$400,000 grant to fund pre-clinical animal models, scale-up production of the drug and regulatory approvals. Carver is also co-investigator on a related research project led by Dr John Schrader, director of the Biomedical Research Centre at the Univ of British Columbia, that will receive \$193,875 from CIHR.

In addition to lobbying for funding under the maternal and child health initiative, Carver says they will also examine opportunities to tap into the \$60 million the federal government will not be spending on an HIV manufacturing facility. The government has said it is working with the

Gates Foundation to re-allocate this money for other HIV vaccine initiatives.

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