

News release:

New Meningitis Vaccine Will Save Thousands Of Lives In Africa

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The Health Protection Agency (HPA) in England had a major role in the development of a vaccine that will save millions of people from the epidemics of Group A meningitis that regularly sweep across sub-Saharan Africa and have done for over a century.

The new vaccine took eight years to develop. It will be launched on Monday 6 December in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso in West Africa at the start of a campaign to immunise 20 million people aged one-29 years in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, three of the worst affected countries in Africa's notorious meningitis belt.

The ultimate aim is to vaccinate 300 million people in 25 African countries by 2015.

The programme is being driven by The Meningitis Vaccine Project (MVP), a partnership between the World Health Organization (WHO) and PATH. The programme is supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation which has contributed funding of approximately £44 million.

The HPA in England and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the United States are key partners. The HPA's role was to evaluate the new vaccine's immunogenicity, its ability to stimulate an immune reaction in recipients of the vaccine, at each stage in its development.

The serological work on the vaccine was undertaken by a team headed by Professor Ray Borrow in the HPA's Vaccine Evaluation Unit, which is located in the Agency's North West Regional Laboratory in Manchester. The Agency also assisted the project with data analysis.

Dr. David Heymann, HPA chairman and for four years a member of an advisory group to the MVP, said: "We are proud of our involvement in such a worthwhile humanitarian effort. Meningitis is a devastating disease and this project will save countless thousands of lives and will hopefully put an end to the regular cycles of misery and suffering that it causes in sub-Saharan Africa."

More than 88,000 cases of Group A meningitis were reported in Africa last year and approximately 5,000 people died. In one of the worst recorded epidemics in 1996, 25,000 people died.

Professor Borrow commented: "The vaccination programme is ambitious but it is under-pinned by years of research and development by the various partners in the project.

"The new vaccine will provide long-term protection for adults and children and it will have the additional benefit of creating herd immunity for non-vaccinated people who live in close proximity with those who have been vaccinated. It is hoped that ultimately 450 million people will be protected."

Justin McCracken, HPA Chief Executive, said: "The vaccination programme will save lives in some of the poorest countries in the world, where health intervention has been desperately

needed. This is health protection in its truest sense and the benefits for sub-Saharan Africa will be increasingly apparent in years to come."

Notes

The new conjugate vaccine for group A meningitis has been especially developed for the Meningitis Vaccine Project (MVP), a partnership of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the international non-profit organisation PATH.

The MVP was set up in 2001 with core funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The Foundation originally made a grant of 70 million US dollars, of which approximately 50 million dollars went into the vaccine's development.

The vaccine is being produced for the MVP by the Serum Institute of India Limited for approximately 30 pence a dose, a fraction of the normal vaccine costs.

As stated in the press release the vaccine's immunogenicity was evaluated by the HPA's Vaccine Evaluation Unit in Manchester. The Agency also assisted with data analysis.

The immediate aim of the project is to vaccinate 20 million people in three African countries. 10,000 vaccinators have been trained in Burkina Faso alone and they plan to immunise 12.5 million people in the course of the next month.

It is hoped that 300 million people in 25 countries in the meningitis belt, 70% of the total population of these countries, will be vaccinated by 2015. If the 70% of population target is met, a total of 450 million people will be protected as a result of the "herd immunity" that will be created.

Source:
Health Protection Agency

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