

In memoriam: Dr. Brown Okoko, 1965-2008



Medical Research Council clinical site, Basse, The Gambia. As the first vaccination day comes to a successful end on October 2, 2006, Dr. Brown Okoko (right) debriefs with some of his staff.

The Meningitis Vaccine Project (MVP) team is saddened to report the untimely death of Dr. Brown Okoko, Principal Investigator at the MVP clinical site in Basse, The Gambia, on September 27.

Brown Okoko, who was born on August 4, 1965, graduated from the University of Calabar in Nigeria with a degree in medicine and surgery. He worked in various capacities at the Jos University Teaching Hospital. He later worked in The Gambia and in the United Kingdom.

In 2006 Brown was appointed a Principal Investigator in the MVP. A dedicated pediatrician, he led a successful Phase 2 clinical trial of a meningococcal A conjugate vaccine on the Medical Research Council clinical site in Basse. This pivotal study was evaluating the safety and immunogenicity of the new conjugate vaccine in 12–23 month olds. Brown's wisdom and energy, his common sense, and his commitment to community participation contributed hugely to the trial's success. Later, he was also in charge of the Phase 2/3 study of this vaccine in 2–29 year olds.

In Brown's own words, "Continuous consultation, collaboration, and interaction between study communities, sponsors, and researchers on site could be an important key to a successful clinical study or public health intervention as they could increase communities' sense of ownership of research and their future commitment to implementation of result-based interventions. To meet these pragmatic needs for vaccine development and simultaneously respect participants' autonomy, we need an approach that critically examines the public engagement with science." [Brown Okoko, August 2008]

Brown Okoko was married and leaves behind his wife (Caroline) and three young children (Grace, Elshadi, and Ebenezer). He will be greatly missed.

Dear partners, friends, and colleagues:

The following is a summary of recent, current, and upcoming activities at the Meningitis Vaccine Project (MVP). We welcome your comments and suggestions at info@meningvax.org and encourage you to forward this update to friends or colleagues who might be interested in learning about MVP's progress.

If you wish not to receive this update, simply reply to this email, changing the subject to "unsubscribe MVP news digest."

Vaccine Development Activities

- The consistency lots of the new meningococcal A (MenA) conjugate vaccine for the Phase 3 clinical trials have been prepared at Serum Institute of India Limited (SIIL), India.
- Good progress has been made toward completing the regulatory file. The aim is to submit the file to the World Health Organization (WHO) for prequalification in the first quarter of 2009. Countries are only able to purchase a vaccine through UNICEF once a prequalification certificate has been granted by WHO.

Clinical Activities

- In accordance with the recommendation of the MVP expert panel which convened in June 2008, the study protocols for the Phase 2/3 study in Mali, Senegal, and The Gambia have been amended. Initially subjects were to be offered a dose of the currently available meningococcal polysaccharide vaccine at the end of the study. However, in view of the safety and immunogenicity data of the MenA conjugate vaccine, subjects will now be offered a dose of the study vaccine if serologic tests indicate insufficient protection against disease. This amendment has been approved by all relevant ethical committees and regulatory authorities.
- One-year follow-up visits for the Phase 2/3 study have started in Mali, Senegal, and The Gambia. The study is evaluating safety and immunogenicity of the MenA conjugate vaccine in the age groups targeted by the mass vaccination campaigns (2-29 years). The last study visit be conducted in accordance with MVP expert panel recommendation, and subjects will be offered a dose of the study vaccine if serology tests indicate insufficient protection against group A meningococcal meningitis. The study, including safety follow up of subjects receiving the additional dose of the MenA conjugate vaccine, will be completed by December 2008.
- On July 30, Gambian regulatory authorities inspected the Medical Research Council clinical site at Basse, The Gambia, for Phase 2 (toddlers) and Phase 2/3 studies. The report was very favorable. All African sites used for MVP clinical studies have now been inspected by the respective national regulatory authorities.
- Final steps are being completed for the infant study in Ghana; all required ethical and regulatory clearances have been obtained, and an initiation visit took place at Navrongo Health Research Centre. This Phase 2 study will evaluate the safety and immunogenicity of three different doses of the MenA conjugate vaccine in healthy infants. Potential interference with Expanded Programme on Immunization vaccines will also be examined, as well as the comparative immunogenicity and safety of alternative immunization schedules. A total of 1,200 subjects will be recruited.

Surveillance and Epidemic Preparedness Activities

- Relatively few cases of meningitis were reported in this interepidemic period throughout Africa's meningitis belt. In July 318 suspected cases were reported, of which 42 were fatal (case-fatality rate: 13.2%); in August 1,574 suspected cases were reported, of which 218 were fatal (case-fatality rate: 13.9%). In August, most reported cases came from the Democratic Republic of Congo (78%), another sizable portion was reported in Niger (8%).
- The WHO Multi-Disease Surveillance Centre (MDSC) team in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, is preparing its annual report on the epidemic season, covering weeks 1–26, 2008.

- On July 1–3, the MDSC team participated in a meeting at the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean to develop a coordinated strategy involving WHO regional offices in the fight against meningitis.
- On July 7–12, the MDSC team held a workshop in Lagos, Nigeria, on surveillance and response activities to epidemic outbreaks in countries south of Nigeria.
- The MDSC team provided training in data management to surveillance and laboratory staff in Mali (July 14–18) and Togo (July 28–August 2).
- The draft of the new guidelines for case-based surveillance of meningococcal meningitis in the African meningitis belt was finalized during a workshop in Bobo Dioulasso, Burkina Faso, on August 19–22. The new guidelines will enable better control and understanding of bacterial meningitis and epidemic patterns in Africa.

Vaccine Introduction Strategy and Communication

- The 16th International Pathogenic Neisseria Conference took place in Rotterdam, The Netherlands, on September 7–12. On September 8, MVP held an evening session to showcase the project's achievements so far. Chaired by Dr. Musa Hassan-King (consultant to MVP) and Prof. Kader Kondé (WHO), the two-hour long session included presentations by MVP staff and partners, including Dr. Mamoudou Djingarey (MDSC), who gave an overview of meningitis surveillance activities over the past few years; Dr. Prasad Kulkarni (SIIL) and Dr. Marie-Pierre Prédiosi (WHO), who detailed the safety and immunogenicity data emerging from the ongoing clinical trials; and MVP's director Dr. Marc LaForce (PATH), who spoke on the expected public health impact following introduction of the new MenA conjugate vaccine in sub-Saharan Africa. More than 200 scientists attended the evening session, and the feedback from attendees was very positive. A total of eleven posters presented at the meeting documented the encouraging scientific results to date. On September 12, Dr. LaForce gave a presentation about the development of an affordable group A meningococcal conjugate vaccine. He outlined the background to the project; the safety and efficacy of the new vaccine, the importance of good surveillance systems, and the successful partnerships that have defined MVP work. Abstracts of posters and presentations are available via the conference website: <http://www.ipnc2008.org/>. Some of the posters are available online [here](#).
- The 58th session of the WHO Regional Committee for Africa took place in Yaoundé, Cameroon, on September 1–5. On September 4, health ministers from countries of the African meningitis belt adopted the Yaoundé Declaration, thereby committing themselves to introduce the new MenA conjugate vaccine developed through the MVP. Specifically, health ministers agreed to prepare comprehensive meningitis control plans, including the introduction of the new vaccine, once available; to implement meningitis control strategies; to undertake joint action vis-à-vis the threat; to improve information exchange for epidemic response and to contribute financially to activities to control epidemics. This highly public statement provides crucial support for the aims of MVP from the leadership of those countries where the new vaccine will be introduced. The full press release is available online [here](#). The Yaoundé Declaration is available online [here](#).

Special Announcement

- PATH has launched a redesigned and upgraded Vaccine Resource Library (VRL) that offers a wide variety of high-quality, scientifically accurate documents and links on specific diseases and topics in immunization. The resources are organized in a web-based database that provides a number of ways to view information and access content. To access the VRL, click here: www.path.org/vaccineresources/.

That's all for now from the MVP team. Stay tuned for our next news digest in three months' time.

We look forward to receiving your comments at info@meningvax.org.

Created in 2001, the Meningitis Vaccine Project is a partnership between WHO and PATH. The mission of MVP is to eliminate epidemic meningitis as a public health problem in sub-Saharan Africa through the development, testing, introduction, and widespread use of conjugate meningococcal vaccines.

For more information on MVP, please visit our website at <http://www.meningvax.org>.