



Meningitis Vaccine Project director Dr. F. Marc LaForce to retire

Public health expert led successful effort to develop a new vaccine against epidemic meningitis in Africa

Ferney-Voltaire, France, 20 December 2011—Dr. F. Marc LaForce today announced that he will retire from his position as director of the Meningitis Vaccine Project (MVP). Dr. LaForce will remain in his role with MVP through March 2012. PATH will recruit a project director to guide MVP, and will work with the World Health Organization and other partners to ensure continued project success.

Dr. LaForce was recruited in 2001 to lead MVP, a partnership between PATH, a Seattle-based international nonprofit organization, and the World Health Organization (WHO) to eliminate devastating meningitis epidemics in sub-Saharan Africa. Dr. LaForce led MVP's successful efforts over the next nine years to develop a group A meningococcal conjugate vaccine called MenAfriVac™.

“Marc LaForce’s determination and leadership have been central to the development of this breakthrough vaccine,” said Dr. Christopher J. Elias, PATH president and CEO. “His ability to create key partnerships with dozens of collaborators across four continents paved the way to bring this vaccine from idea to lifesaving reality.”

Millions now protected against meningitis

MenAfriVac™ is a vaccine of many firsts. It is the first vaccine specifically designed for Africa in response to calls from African health officials, and it is the first time a vaccine has been introduced in Africa before reaching any other region of the world.

In December 2010, MenAfriVac™ was introduced during mass vaccination campaigns in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. These countries are part of sub-Saharan Africa’s meningitis belt where annual meningitis epidemics kill 10 percent of those sickened and leave 20 percent of patients with disabilities. At the close of the epidemic season in June 2011, not a single case of meningitis A had been reported among the 19.5 million people who received the MenAfriVac™ vaccine last year.

In December 2011, the vaccine is being introduced in Cameroon, Chad, and Nigeria, reaching 22 million people in the three countries. It is expected that 320 million people from 25 countries in the meningitis belt will have received a dose of MenAfriVac™ by 2016. PATH and WHO are steadfastly committed to ensuring that this highly acclaimed project has the leadership and support needed for continued success.

New vaccine is safe and affordable

The innovative vaccine-development model pioneered by MVP and its collaborators produced the vaccine at one-tenth the US\$500 million investment usually required to bring a new vaccine to market. At less than 50 cents per dose, the vaccine was produced at a price that African development ministers said they could afford.

“For the first time in history, Africa has a safe, affordable technology that provides long-term protection against the primary cause of periodic epidemics that kill and disable thousands of victims in Africa’s meningitis belt,” said Dr. Jean-Marie Okwo-Bele, director of the Immunization, Vaccines and Biologicals department at WHO. “This would not have been possible without the vision and determination with which Marc has led this work for over a decade. What has been achieved during this time under his leadership is truly remarkable.”

A passion for public health

Following his retirement from PATH, Dr. LaForce plans to return to academia and teaching at George Washington University. He said he looks forward to watching the remaining African countries in the meningitis belt introduce MenAfriVac™ in the next few years.

“My passion always has been public health. Serving as director of the Meningitis Vaccine Project has been a great privilege and one of the most rewarding experiences of my life,” said Dr. LaForce. “When I took on the job in the summer of 2001, we had nothing, and yet we succeeded in translating that nothingness into a safe and highly immunogenic vaccine that is already saving lives in Africa. It has been an honor to work with staff, partnering institutions, experts, and consultants who are so talented and so dedicated to a critical mission—strengthening public health in developing countries.”