



Program for Appropriate Technology in Health



WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION  
ORGANISATION MONDIALE DE LA SANTE

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## **PATH AND WHO APPLAUD \$70 MILLION AWARD FROM GATES FOUNDATION TO PREVENT MENINGITIS EPIDEMICS IN AFRICA**

### **Program to Fast-Track Development and Immunization with Long-Acting Vaccine Against Bacterial Meningitis in Sub-Saharan Africa**

SEATTLE, WA and GENEVA, SWITZERLAND (May 30, 2001) – A partnership spearheaded by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) is launching an ambitious new, ten-year program to put an end to the deadly meningitis epidemics that have plagued Sub-Saharan Africa for more than 100 years. Today the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation awarded the partnership US \$70 million to develop and produce meningitis vaccines tailored for children and adults living in Africa. The program will ensure the delivery of these vaccines through mass and routine immunization programs in affected countries. Key partners include the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, vaccine companies, and international and national groups working to prevent and respond to meningococcal meningitis epidemics in Africa.

"We are thrilled by the support being provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to the Meningitis Vaccine Project," said Dr. Yasuhiro Suzuki, Executive Director, Health Technologies and Pharmaceuticals, WHO. "We hope that this program will prevent and, in time, eliminate meningitis epidemics in Sub-Saharan Africa, where some 200 million people are at risk of infection."

Meningococcal meningitis is an infection of the brain that afflicts infants, children, and young adults, and can progress over several hours to death. It is the most feared disease in Africa's "meningitis belt", which stretches from Ethiopia to The Gambia and Senegal, even though it kills fewer people than HIV, malaria or tuberculosis. Epidemics of this disease occur almost every year in one or more countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and may infect over 200,000 people a year. Even with antibiotic treatment, at least one of every ten infected children will die, with another 10 to 20 percent left with permanent disabilities, such as hearing loss, mental retardation, and loss of limb. Nine African countries have had meningitis epidemics this year, with Burkina Faso now battling a major outbreak.

"This generous donation will finance the development, manufacture, and pilot introduction of

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new, tailor-made vaccine in Sub-Saharan Africa," said Dr. Christopher Elias, President of PATH. "And this project will establish a unique model for public-private partnerships for developing other vaccines or drugs against diseases largely limited to the poorest countries."

The currently available vaccine against meningitis offers only short-term protection and does not confer "herd" immunity among large populations, especially in very young children who are at highest risk. The Meningitis Vaccine Project will work with companies to develop a new conjugate vaccine against the serogroups prevalent in Africa that would offer the prospect of both a longer duration of protection and herd immunity. The type of meningitis causing epidemics in Africa is rare in industrial countries. Uncertainties about the commercial market together with high costs of development and production traditionally discourage manufacturers from investing in a vaccine for a disease concentrated among poor countries.

By reaching older children and adults, this program will also extend the efforts of the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI) to strengthen routine immunization programs. Africa's meningitis belt includes countries with some of the poorest performing immunization systems in the world. Stronger immunization systems will be essential for reaching these same people with future vaccines against malaria, tuberculosis, and other deadly diseases.

"This program will develop a vaccine delivery system that paves the way for other badly needed vaccines to reach young adults in the field in Africa," said Suzuki.

"We believe the new meningitis vaccine can be ready for use within five years," said Elias. "If that happens, this project will represent the first time that the public sector has successfully commissioned the development of a vaccine that is critically needed by Africa but that would not otherwise have been made by the private sector."

So far in this year's meningitis season, which runs from November to June, more than 40,000 people in Sub-Saharan Africa, mostly children and young adults, have been afflicted, and more than 4,000 people have died. Until the new vaccine becomes widely available, the International Coordinating Group on Vaccine Provision for Epidemic Meningitis (WHO, UNICEF, Médecins sans Frontières, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and others) is ensuring that the current vaccine is supplied to countries experiencing epidemics. The international health community has renewed efforts to help countries in the meningitis belt improve surveillance, strengthen capacity for laboratory confirmation of cases, plan and carry out rapid response, and maintain political and health service commitment to these activities.

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The World Health Organization (<http://www.who.int>) was founded in 1948. A specialized agency of the United Nations with 191 Member States, WHO promotes technical cooperation for health among nations, carries out programs to control and eradicate disease and strives to improve the quality of human life.

PATH (Program for Appropriate Technology in Health) is an international, nonprofit, nongovernmental organization dedicated to improving health, especially the health of women and children. PATH (<http://www.path.org>) identifies, develops, and applies appropriate and innovative solutions to public health problems, particularly in low-resource settings. Founded in 1977, PATH is headquartered in Seattle, Washington, and has program offices in Cambodia; India; Indonesia; Kenya; Philippines; Thailand; Ukraine; Viet Nam; Seattle, WA; and Washington, D.C.