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## **UCT to benefit from multi-million USAID funding to develop HIV-Aids vaccines**

The University of Cape Town's (UCT) vaccine development project is to benefit from a more than \$45 million (approximately R867 million) funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to implement a programme called HIV Vaccine Innovation, Science, and Technology Acceleration in Africa (HIV-VISTA).

USAID awarded the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) the multi-million funds following a successful grant application led by the SAMRC together with other leading scientists from across the continent in a collaboration called the BRILLIANT (BRinging Innovation to cLinical and Laboratory research to end HIV In Africa through New vaccine Technology) consortium.

Professor Linda-Gail Bekker, director and CEO of UCT's Desmond Tutu HIV Centre and Health Foundation, said: "Africa has borne an enormous burden of the HIV epidemic and it is fitting that our continent plays a significant role in bringing an effective, affordable and accessible HIV vaccine to the world. Our scientists, clinicians, advocates and communities have played an important part in the HIV response to date and we are very excited to be able to carefully and efficiently utilise these resources to continue to make a global difference."

The BRILLIANT Consortium's programme of research will focus on utilising the existing capacity, scientific talent, ingenuity and investments made in community engagement in research in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) to advance the HIV vaccine field through supporting activities in five interrelated areas:

- Partner with civil society advocates, affected communities (including those affected by and people living with HIV/AIDS), policymakers, and communicators to advance sub-Saharan African-led HIV vaccine science,
- Design and implement early-stage clinical trials of HIV vaccine immunogens,
- Conduct laboratory analyses on samples from trials and epidemiological studies,
- Test innovative preclinical HIV vaccine concepts, advancing the most promising candidates toward clinical trials,
- Strengthen systems of collaborations for HIV vaccine research in SSA and increase opportunities to advance the careers of promising SSA scientists.

To date, an HIV vaccine to sustainably control the HIV pandemic remains elusive. Despite the significant progress in combating HIV and achieving epidemic control, the most recent UNAIDS global analysis estimated that 1,3 million people became newly infected in 2022, with almost two-thirds of these new infections occurring in SSA. Women and girls accounted for 50% of these new infections globally, and 63% of all new infections in SSA, where there are twice as many young women as men between the ages of 15 and 24 already living with HIV. Other key populations who are very vulnerable to HIV infection but struggle to access treatment and prevention due to stigma and policies would benefit greatly from a vaccine.

While new biomedical tools, such as pre-exposure prophylaxis, offer promise for continuing to reduce HIV incidence, a safe and effective preventive HIV vaccine could enable a more profound, rapid, and cost-effective reduction than would be possible by employing already existing interventions. A safe, effective and affordable preventive vaccine remains a critical key to epidemic control. Since most new infections are occurring in SSA, it is critical that HIV vaccine candidates are designed to effectively neutralise viruses that are prevalent in this region.

The BRILLIANT Consortium aims to support SSA scientists, institutions, and innovative systems of collaboration in designing and testing improved HIV vaccine candidates that will advance the field toward the long-term goal of a safe and globally effective HIV vaccine. Communities are a central part of this work and are represented in all decision-making bodies of the programme.

South African scientists collaborating with the SAMRC are ranked among the world's best in all aspects of the HIV response, in the prevention of HIV infection from mother-to-child, the development of newer and safer drug regimens, and the health service delivery of antiretroviral treatment and preventions to name a few.

Professor Glenda Gray, SAMRC president and CEO, said: "We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the US government through USAID for their invaluable support in our mission to find an HIV Vaccine. This investment is not just a financial contribution; it's a beacon of hope for HIV vaccine discovery in Africa. Let us remember that each dollar invested in research is an investment in hope, an investment in healthier futures, and an investment towards a world free from the burden of HIV."

***Ends***

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