



For Immediate release: May 15, 2008

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Immunizing Against Misinformation and Shortsightedness

AVAC Report Injects a Dose of Reality into the Debate on the State of AIDS Vaccine Research

New York, NY, May 15, 2008 — The AIDS Vaccine Advocacy Coalition (AVAC) today released a new report that provides a comprehensive review of recent developments in AIDS vaccine research. *AVAC Report 2008: The Search Must Continue* explores the issues that have been raised in the wake of the failure of Merck's vaccine candidate and provides context for the events and major changes of the last year in HIV prevention research.

In the Report's opening letter, AVAC Executive Director Mitchell Warren says "Enough is enough," with regard to the misinformation that has crept into some of the public conversations about AIDS vaccine research. In the report, AVAC argues that continuing to move forward with AIDS vaccine research and testing is imperative and lays out recommendations for the AIDS vaccine and HIV prevention field.

AVAC's 11th annual Report on AIDS vaccines also looks at the comparative advantages of major players, including the U.S. National Institutes of Health and the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative, and analyzes the current environment for decision-making about future clinical trials. The report is available online at www.avac.org/reports.htm.

The AVAC Report comes at a critical time for HIV prevention research. Over the past 12 months, several trials, including vaccine, microbicide, cervical barrier method and herpes-treatment trials, have yielded disappointing results of no efficacy. Recently, a slew of editorials and media coverage have spotlighted AIDS vaccine research and, in some instances, included calls to end public funding or to reappportion funding away from AIDS vaccine research toward existing HIV treatment or prevention interventions. At the same time, there are ongoing discussions at the NIH about whether to launch another vaccine efficacy trial using a strategy developed by the NIH's Vaccine Research Center.

"With recent pessimistic headlines and the creation of naïve and false dichotomies between research and clinical trials or between treatment and prevention or existing interventions and new research, we at AVAC say enough is enough," said Mitchell Warren, executive director of AVAC. "An AIDS vaccine is possible, and it is essential."

"It's been a challenging year for the AIDS vaccine field and for HIV prevention research generally, but the recent spate of statements that seem to revise the history of the past few years of AIDS vaccine research are deeply troubling," said Warren. "Now more than ever, we must maintain momentum in AIDS vaccine and other HIV prevention research while simultaneously continuing to ramp up provision of existing treatment and prevention options for all those who need them."

“We were all disappointed with the results from the trials of Merck’s vaccine candidate last year,” said Pontiano Kaleebu, Assistant Director of the Uganda Virus Research Institute, Chairperson of the African AIDS Vaccine Programme, and an AVAC board member. “But we must now reclaim the narrative of what happened with trials of that vaccine and of what they mean for the future of AIDS vaccines and HIV prevention. Here in Uganda and throughout Africa and the world, we still desperately need an AIDS vaccine and we are committed to continuing the search.”

“There have been major changes in the AIDS vaccine field and in biomedical HIV prevention research in the last year. The AVAC Report provides a comprehensive and sensible guide to where the vaccine field stands now and where it needs to go,” said Alan Bernstein, executive director of the Global HIV Vaccine Enterprise.

In *The Search Must Continue*, AVAC makes several key recommendations for moving the AIDS vaccine and HIV prevention research fields forward, based on a comprehensive review of recent events in the field and future plans of the major players in AIDS vaccine and HIV prevention research as well as conversations with researchers, funders, policy makers and community representatives. These recommendations include:

- Ensure that the scientific data from the STEP trial are fully assessed and used to inform the design of improved immunization strategies.
- Articulate the human discovery trials agenda and balance vaccine discovery and development.
- Structure the vaccine field so that there are career paths for young investigators.
- Prepare for results of the Thai prime-boost vaccine efficacy trial.
- Systematically improve community engagement strategies, especially as decisions are made around the design of the PAVE 100 vaccine trial.
- Clearly communicate and manage expectations of prevention research trials and results.
- Increase support for pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) research as well as community stewardship of this promising area of research.
- Engage in meaningful dialogue around the scaling-up of male circumcision programs that adequately address HIV testing and gender-specific issues in program rollout.
- Expand community engagement with and critique of the microbicides science agenda.
- Reconsider how clinical trials infrastructure is sustained and clinical research agendas are developed—in discussion led by developing country voices.

The Report is being released ahead of HIV Vaccine Awareness Day, May 18th, which commemorates U.S. President Bill Clinton’s call for a concerted effort to develop an AIDS vaccine within a decade. Today, it is a global observance to recognize and thank the thousands of volunteers, community members, health professionals, researchers and scientists who are working together to find a safe and effective AIDS vaccine.

“Yes, we have all been surprised and disappointed in the results of the Merck vaccine candidate,” Warren said. “But that is the nature of the scientific process. To acknowledge failure of a candidate vaccine is in no way to concede overall defeat. We all now have a tremendous opportunity to learn from these setbacks and to be better for them—better, even, than we might have been without them. This year, as we commemorate HIV Vaccine Awareness Day, AVAC remains committed and cautiously optimistic.”

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About AVAC: Founded in 1995, the AIDS Vaccine Advocacy Coalition (AVAC) is a non-profit, community- and consumer-based organization that uses public education, policy analysis, advocacy and community mobilization to accelerate the ethical development and global delivery of AIDS vaccines and other HIV prevention options. For more information, visit www.avac.org.