

## Capability Statement:

# Advocacy to Accelerate Prevention R&D for Sexually Transmitted Infections



The World Health Organization estimates that more than a million new sexually transmitted infections (STIs) occur globally every day. Many of these infections can lead to cancer, infertility, severe pregnancy and newborn complications, and an increased risk of HIV acquisition. While most STIs are curable, they often go undiagnosed and untreated because they tend to cause few or no initial symptoms. Available diagnostics are often too costly for routine screening in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), and few vaccines exist to address the most common STIs.

Despite the scope and urgency of the problem, STIs receive little attention. These infections are often stigmatizing, and their effects are most devastating among groups with little political power, such as adolescent girls and young women, sex workers, gay men and other men who have sex with men.

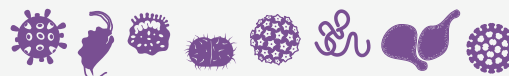
***Advocacy and action are needed to accelerate the development and delivery of STI diagnostic and prevention tools that meet the needs of end users.***

### **How AVAC is responding:**

AVAC and its robust network of global partners are implementing a [bold advocacy](#) agenda to expedite the research and rollout of strategies to test for and prevent STIs. AVAC and partners are filling gaps in STI awareness and literacy and equipping advocates to accelerate STI R&D. AVAC has received catalytic support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and WHO for this work. Additional support will allow us to expand global partnerships and strengthen information and advocacy around the development and equitable roll-out and implementation of STI prevention tools.

Specifically, additional resources will allow AVAC to:

- **Enhance research literacy and visibility** around STI R&D to support advocacy for increased access to more prevention and treatment options, community and country health priorities.
- **Expand the cadre of STI-focused and engaged advocates** pushing for strategic STI prevention programs to better address rising STI rates at local, national and global levels.
- **Build consensus around priorities for the field** and increase community involvement and voices in STI prevention and research programs.



### **STI R&D: On the Brink of Breakthroughs**

- Vaccines to prevent chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis are in pre-clinical and clinical trials.
- An existing vaccine for one type of meningitis also appears to provide some protection against gonorrhea.
- Point-of-care (POC) tests for STIs that are currently in development will improve the detection of STIs and limit time between test and treatment. More POCs are becoming available for resource-limited settings as well.

## **AVAC will further enhance research literacy and visibility around STI R&D.**

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Building on decades of experience bridging the gap between scientific research and community perspectives, AVAC provides resources to highlight the importance of STI prevention and track and translate research for improved diagnostic and prevention tools. **AVAC's resources offer a centralized source for accessible, trusted, actionable information about the STI R&D pipeline.** AVAC will continue to strengthen awareness and research literacy among advocates and advocacy networks so they can inform STI R&D for diagnostics and vaccines, including:

- Updating [STI Watch](#) to include stronger advocacy messaging for each pathogen, graphics that explain how different STIs are detected and treated, and a system for researchers to submit trials for inclusion in the STI Clinical Trials Dashboard. AVAC will ensure that STIWatch.org and the Clinical Trials Dashboard continue to be seen as comprehensive resources for information on STI diagnostics, vaccines and other key topics for eight priority pathogens.
- Expanding AVAC's [STI Watch newsletter](#) and webinar [series](#) to reach a global audience of STI prevention stakeholders, including advocates, funders, policymakers and product developers. These external communications will focus on important STI topics, including R&D priorities identified from our resource tracking report.
- Development of advocacy guides on key and emerging issues in STI prevention, including DoxyPEP, and a comprehensive guide on STI testing language, specifically focused on the difference between self-collection and self-testing.
- Collaborating with WHO to host quarterly community-focused journal clubs to highlight STI research occurring in LMICs and provide an opportunity for communities, civil society and researchers to engage with one another.
- Leveraging AVAC's successful [Media Science Café framework](#) to include a focus on STI R&D for diagnostics and vaccines. The Media Science Café program works to strengthen the capacity of journalists to report on global health and science topics. The program has engaged hundreds of journalists over its ten-year history, and external estimates suggest that science stories released due to the program have reached ~230 million people.

## **AVAC will expand the cadre of STI-focused advocates.**

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STIs intersect with the concerns of many vibrant advocacy communities, including HIV, sexual and reproductive health, cancer, infertility and maternal and newborn health. AVAC helps build bridges between these communities to raise awareness and interest in STI prevention, tap valuable expertise and create a diverse and powerful coalition of advocates to advance inclusive, effective, people-centered STI policies and programs. Working with AVAC's robust partnership network, **we will expand a network of informed STI advocates, focusing on East and Southern Africa, to co-create and advance advocacy priorities that enhance STI prevention R&D and access to existing tools.** Priorities include:

- Building on STI landscaping projects ([Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)) to identify specific policy and advocacy "asks." This will include working with their specific governments to identify STI policy priorities and objectives, such as STI testing funding availability, diagnostic priorities and developing or updating STI strategic plans.
- Leveraging and expanding AVAC's [global partner network](#) and existing prevention advocacy programs (i.e., [Advocacy Fellows Program](#), Coalition to build Momentum, Power, Activism, Strategy & Solidarity ([COMPASS](#)) Africa, the USAID-funded Coalition to Accelerate and Support Prevention Research ([CASPR](#)) and the NVF-funded Key Population Trans-National Coalition ([KP-TNC](#))) to integrate and embed STI advocacy.
- AVAC will continue to administer the STI sub-award program in East and Southern Africa to identify, define and advance STI advocacy priorities and engage with governments and other key stakeholders to assess willingness to pay for STI diagnostics.

## DoxyPEP

*A growing body of evidence shows that taking a single oral dose of doxycycline within 72 hours after condomless sex can substantially reduce the risk for chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis among men who have sex with men and among transgender women. Doxycycline postexposure prophylaxis, or DoxyPEP, holds significant promise, and public health agencies are working to provide guidance on its use. However, DoxyPEP research is not complete. More research is needed to learn if there are ways for women to use DoxyPEP successfully, to explore its potential in LMICs, to understand how to increase DoxyPEP awareness and demand among key populations, and to monitor the impact on antibiotic resistance.*

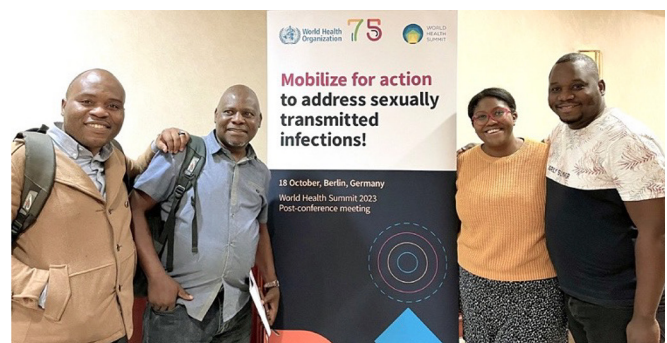
### **AVAC will build consensus around priorities for the field.**

Current research suggests breakthroughs are possible to deliver better, affordable diagnostics and prevention options against STIs. AVAC is working with a growing network of STI advocates to expand and advance the R&D pipeline for diagnostics and vaccines while driving policies and funding to bolster the use of existing diagnostics. AVAC will continue to expand its work to increase the influence and impact of community perspectives on STI prevention R&D, awareness and access. AVAC will ensure that user-centered approaches and voices are incorporated in developing new options, including a move from syndromic management to diagnostic strategies. Priorities include:

- **STIs and PEPFAR:** PEPFAR funding has helped to build lab capacity that could offer the infrastructure needed to expand STI testing and AMR monitoring. AVAC will work with advocates in PEPFAR-funded countries to document how the program has supported STI testing and treatment services and the capacity/opportunities to use PEPFAR funding and infrastructure to implement new diagnostics and support STI screening, testing and treatment services.
- **STI Self-swab/self-collection training:** Self-collection is becoming popular in the STI world for specimen collection, particularly in LMICs for HPV testing and cervical cancer screening. However, awareness is limited, and community-led health training is needed. AVAC will work with existing partners in East and Southern Africa to offer training on self-collection and monitor how these trainings impact cervical cancer screening rates. These trainings can help set the foundation for providing self-collection for other STI tests, including chlamydia and gonorrhea.
- **DoxyPEP:** AVAC is initiating conversations to ensure that advocates' and end-users' voices are included in research priorities. AVAC is also particularly interested in research to understand and monitor DoxyPEP potential impact on antimicrobial resistance. AVAC will conduct an initial think tank that brings advocates, policymakers and researchers together to discuss and help shape the DoxyPEP research landscape.

### **Why AVAC?**

- **AVAC has a proven history of mobilizing for inclusive and impactful programs, products and policies.** AVAC advocates for a policy environment that supports and adequately finances equitable access to research, services, interventions and products with communities at the center. AVAC supports and fortifies a robust network of bold, informed advocates and coalitions to advance inclusive, effective, people-centered policies and programs.



AVAC and partners in Berlin at a meeting to mobilize advocacy to address STIs (October 2023)

- **AVAC effectively builds bridges between science and community through communication.** In the world of HIV and global health equity writ large, there is often a gap between science and community perspectives. Communication across diverse stakeholder groups is essential to ensure that user needs inform research, product development and delivery systems and that research findings and emerging evidence are shared with communities, advocates and implementers to enable effective use.
- **AVAC cultivates and sustains partnerships to spur scientific advances and nimbly apply those to emerging health needs and issues.** Effective coordination and balanced partnerships are vital to creating an enabling policy environment, accelerating ethical product development and advocating for equitable access to emerging health solutions. AVAC has established trusted, influential and durable relationships with stakeholders—from policy makers to civil society advocates, industry to academics, product developers to program implementers. We help to shape, uplift and leverage an ecosystem of diverse and committed partners and coalitions that collectively advance HIV prevention and global health equity.

### Spotlight: AVAC Experts

- **Alison Footman, PhD, Senior Program Manager for STIs:** Alison leads AVAC's STI portfolio and brings her research experience in STI vaccine and diagnostics, vaccine hesitancy and implementation science. Through her leadership, the STI program has developed new partnerships that have allowed the program to become more visible and a go-to resource for STI information. She serves on the editorial board of *Sexually Transmitted Diseases* and has published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *Sexually Transmitted Diseases* and *Human Vaccines & Immunotherapeutics*.
- **Stacey Hannah, Director of Research Engagement:** Stacey oversees AVAC's advocacy, engagement, literacy and related efforts around products in the research and development (R&D) pipeline. Her primary responsibilities include directing AVAC's USAID-funded Coalition to Accelerate and Support Prevention Research (CASPR) Project, an Africa-centered advocacy movement promoting HIV prevention R&D as a core component of the global HIV response, as well as overseeing AVAC's Good Participatory Practice (GPP) efforts. Stacey also oversees AVAC's growing body of research engagement outside the field of HIV prevention, including HIV cure, STIs and COVID-19.

### About AVAC

AVAC is an international non-profit organization that leverages its independent voice and global partnerships to accelerate ethical development and equitable delivery of effective HIV prevention options, as part of a comprehensive and integrated pathway to global health equity. Follow AVAC on Twitter [@HIVpxresearch](#) and find more at [www.avac.org](http://www.avac.org).