

HIV SURVEILLANCE WORKSHOP

Up-to-date, accurate, and regular epidemiologic surveillance is key to the design of rational HIV prevention programs. Data from Nigeria's National Action Committee on AIDS described by Professor Akinsete suggest that HIV infection rates vary considerably by state and risk group. An immediate goal of the Initiative, therefore, will be to establish accurate and thorough surveillance of HIV infection rates in the three target states.

In March 2001, the Initiative will sponsor a workshop on HIV testing and surveillance in Dakar, Senegal, where Nigerian virologists from relevant government and university laboratories from all three states will spend five days at the Laboratoire de Bacteriologie et Virologie at Cheikh Anta Diop Université. This laboratory—designated a UNAIDS HIV Reference Laboratory and led by Professor Souleymane Mboup—uses state-of-the-art HIV methodologies not only for Senegal's long-standing nationwide sentinel surveillance program, but also for various HIV/AIDS intervention studies.

Workshop participants will review their existing HIV surveillance methods. The utility of various pep-
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Challenges and Opportunities

WITH A POPULATION OF 113 MILLION AND HIV infection rates that are relatively low for Africa, Nigeria has both enormous challenges and great opportunities. The risks are considerable: HIV prevalence rates in Nigeria, estimated at 5 percent, have begun to rise rapidly and unevenly. Yet the opportunities are tremendous as well: early, highly focused intervention efforts have been shown to significantly reduce HIV infection rates and prevent explosive increases in the epidemic.

Countries that have achieved dramatic results in stemming the spread of HIV tend to share several characteristics—a high-level government commitment, policy changes that reflect the impact of the epidemic on society, intensive media outreach, interventions targeted at high-risk populations, laboratory and field research, and scientific training. Nigeria is now poised to follow this

model of success with the help of the newly formed AIDS Prevention Initiative in Nigeria. The Initiative has amassed critical ingredients for achieving its goals: support from President Olusegun Obasanjo; the involvement of key governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations, and universities in Nigeria; the HIV prevention expertise of Harvard scientists; and a generous grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The Initiative will be modeled on a highly successful program in Senegal, where HIV prevalence rates have been contained at less than 2 percent for more than a decade. This 16-year program, the longest-running HIV collaboration in Africa, is between the Cheikh Anta Diop Université in Dakar and the Harvard *(continued on back page)*

ABOVE: President Olusegun Obasanjo has pledged strong support for the AIDS Prevention Initiative in Nigeria.

ECONOMIC LEADERSHIP TRAINING

Development assistance agencies and governments in the industrialized world have placed an inexplicably low priority on the control of the worldwide AIDS epidemic. As of the late 1990s, the amount of international assistance to deal with the crisis had been at least a hundred-fold lower than the impact of the epidemic on economic development. Without appropriate funding and technical guidance, only a few developing countries have mustered successful efforts against the epidemic.

Jeffrey Sachs, director of the Center for International Development at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, has been a leading advocate for rethinking HIV prevention strategies worldwide and drastically increasing international funding to address the greatest global threat to health and security of our time. Beginning in the spring of 2001, with the support of President Obasanjo's office and the National Advisory Committee on AIDS, Professor Sachs will lead a series of high-level government symposia aimed at analyzing the impact of the epidemic on Nigeria's economic development, developing strategies for financing a major attack on AIDS, and finding ways to facilitate debt restructuring and relief that could provide the necessary funds to tackle the epidemic with significantly more resources and effectiveness than has previously been possible. ■

The Initiative's Launch

IN NOVEMBER 2000, AT THE SAME TIME that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation was announcing its funding commitment to the Initiative, a group of highly respected Nigerian public health officials and scientists were convening at the Harvard School of Public Health to plan the Initiative's beginning phases. Basing their decision on known epidemiologic data and cultural variables, these experts chose Lagos, Oyo, and Plateau states as focal points for the Initiative's first 18 months.

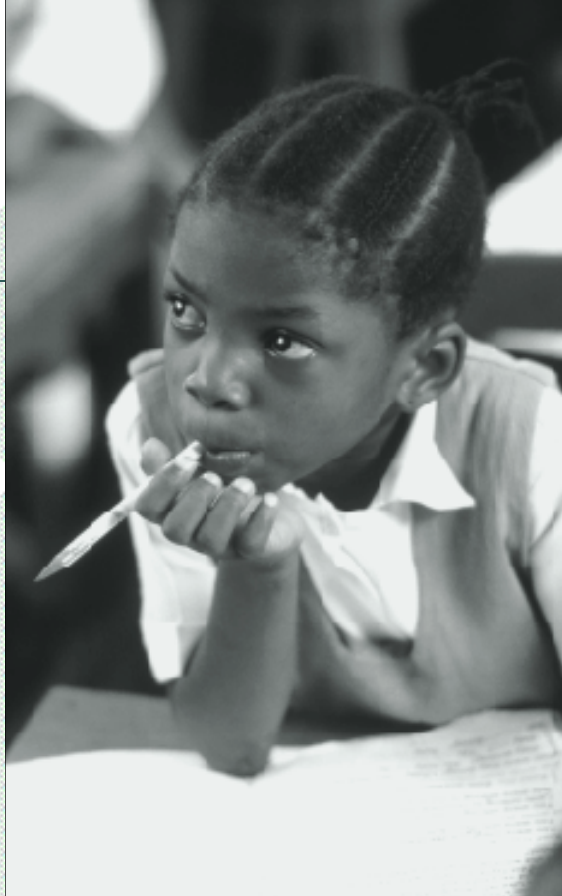
Although the projects identified for each state will differ, the overall program will be guided by the Initiative's goals of working with Nigerian organizations and incorporating significant training and capacity building into all prevention efforts. The crucial information gleaned from this start-up phase can then be evaluated

for implementation in other areas of the country.

In Lagos State, the Initiative will support the multimedia AIDS education campaign of the Lagos State HIV/AIDS Foundation. Led by Professor Olikoye Ransome-Kuti, the foundation organizes and coordinates AIDS efforts throughout Lagos State. The multimedia campaign will feature daily radio messages and jingles promoting HIV prevention, articles in major print publications, and the recording and airing of HIV prevention messages by various celebrities on national television. The campaign will complement non-governmental-organization-sponsored rallies aimed at conveying HIV prevention messages to young people, and all facets of the program will be integrated into the primary health care system of the local governments.

The Initiative will also work with the Lagos State HIV/AIDS Foundation in designing and





AIDS education in schools is critical to outreach efforts in Nigeria.

delivering AIDS education messages in secondary schools throughout the state. The curricula and training of school teachers and officials will be a crucial part of this program, as will the follow-up evaluation of the program, aimed at determining its potential for more widespread application.

In Oyo State, the Initiative will work with the Association for Reproductive and Family Health to promote AIDS education and safe sex practices. This program will link HIV prevention with family planning counseling efforts, which have been well accepted in Nigeria. The HIV prevention and family planning interventions will be delivered to the general population through regional health clinics, and through a market agent network, operating in the major marketplaces in and around Ibadan. This program has an established track record in providing effective counseling messages within a community-based distribution program.

A second project in Oyo State will target high-risk secondary school students by providing significant counseling and training to sexual health counselors in 130 schools. These counselors will establish youth-friendly sexually transmitted disease (STD) clinics to provide diagnostic and treatment services to this important and vulnerable population. A project in the University Hospital STD clinic will determine the preva-

lence and distribution of STDs, evaluate the effectiveness of management of STDs by following symptoms rather than expensive lab assays, and upgrade the STD laboratory methodologies to improve diagnosis and treatment. The University of Ibadan Hospital Virology laboratory, led by Professor David Olaleye, will provide significant support to these efforts. Through active technology transfer, in-country workshops, and operational research, the Initiative will work to strengthen the infrastructure and capacity of this important laboratory.

In Plateau State, the Initiative will focus primarily on HIV surveillance and high-risk group identification. This work will aim to improve epidemiologic surveillance, include a wider range of risk groups, provide better representative sampling, and develop field-tested risk determinant questionnaires. Through characterization of the virus and host interaction—including viral diversity, burden, and immune response—these surveys will allow Initiative personnel to date the epidemic and appropriately plan the relevant interventions to prevent HIV transmission.

The Initiative will extend an existing collaboration between scientists at the Harvard School of Public Health, the Institute of Human Virology in Baltimore, Maryland, Plateau State Hospital, and the University of Jos. Dr. Alash'le Abimiku, a virologist from the Institute of Human Virology, has led a ten-year collaboration with the Plateau State Hospital in Jos and its established International Collaboration for Scientific Culture (ICSC-World Lab) Center. This collaboration will provide relevant information on the prevalence, incidence, and dynamics of the HIV epidemic in Plateau State. Through active technology transfer, in-country workshops, and operational research, the Initiative will work with Professor John Idoko to develop and support the diagnostic capabilities of the STD laboratory at the Jos University Teaching Hospital. This laboratory will be central to the planned intervention trials aimed at reducing the transmission of HIV and other STDs in high-risk populations. ■

ADVISORY COUNCIL MEETING

The Initiative's first Advisory Council meeting will be held on April 23, 2001 in Lagos, organized by Dr. Arese Carrington, associate director of the Initiative. There council members will learn more about Initiative-funded projects, whose implementation and administration they will have the opportunity to guide. The council will also better refine the Initiative's strategic plan, list of priorities, and future benchmarks. Participants will be given the opportunity to visit some of the Initiative's projects before attending the Summit for African Heads of State, over which President Obasanjo will preside later that week in the capital, Abuja. ■

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tide-based assays, rapid tests, and PCR methodologies will be discussed, in an effort to upgrade both HIV and STD diagnostic capabilities. Participants will begin designing statewide surveys to be conducted in the spring of 2001; study methods, sample handling, storage, and testing will be planned to enable incorporation of novel methods for HIV surveillance. ■

Challenges and Opportunities

(continued from front page) School of Public Health in Boston. Professor Phyllis Kanki, who has led the long-term Senegal collaboration, will serve as director of the Initiative in Nigeria.

“The AIDS Prevention Initiative in Nigeria is our opportunity to help a great many people stay healthy,” says Barry Bloom, dean of the Harvard School of Public Health. “Major questions exist in Nigeria on sources of infection, routes of transmission, high-risk populations, and the best strategies to contain the epidemic. We will work with our colleagues in government and non-governmental organizations in three Nigerian states to support model projects for learning how to reduce transmission and control the epidemic.”

Critical to the success of the Initiative will be the enthusiastic support that President Obasanjo has already demonstrated. In the fall of 2000, the president addressed a national audience to pledge his commitment to reduce HIV infection rates and to promote AIDS prevention. And in a letter to the Initiative, he wrote: “I share your concern about preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS in this country; indeed, I believe that it is one of the greatest challenges facing Nigeria in the coming decade.”

“With the strong support of President Obasanjo and his health ministry,” says Professor Kanki, “we are committed to making significant progress in preventing the spread of HIV in Nigeria.” ■



The AIDS Prevention Initiative in Nigeria, a collaboration of the Harvard School of Public Health and the Kennedy School of Government, is supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in partnership with governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations, and universities in Nigeria.

AIDS PREVENTION INITIATIVE IN NIGERIA

Harvard School of Public Health

665 Huntington Avenue

Boston, MA 02115, USA

Telephone: 617-432-3297

Fax: 617-432-3298

Email: apin@hsph.harvard.edu