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Japan Launches Bold Effort to Fight Neglected Diseases by Screening Massive Drug Compound “Libraries” for New Treatments

Global Health Innovative Technology Fund puts Japanese pharmaceutical companies, research institutes on front-lines of battle against TB, malaria and “diseases of poverty”

TOKYO (May 31, 2013)—The Global Health Innovative Technology Fund (GHIT Fund), a new public-private partnership that’s bringing Japanese research and development (R&D) to the global fight against infectious disease, will announce at the **5th Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD V)** a series of historic agreements to screen compound libraries at Japanese pharmaceutical companies and research institutes for new treatments for malaria, tuberculosis, and other afflictions that prey mainly on the poorest of the poor.

“These thirteen agreements are just the first of what we expect will be many global health partnerships facilitated and funded by the GHIT Fund that tap into Japan’s enormous capacity for innovation and technology,” said BT Slingsby, MD, PhD, MPH, who serves as CEO and executive director of the GHIT Fund.

The GHIT Fund is a public-private partnership between the government of Japan, a consortium of Japanese pharmaceutical companies (Astellas Pharma Inc.; Daiichi Sankyo Co., Ltd.; Eisai Co., Ltd.; Shionogi & Co., Ltd.; and Takeda Pharmaceutical Co., Ltd.) and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Launched with a potential five-year commitment of over US\$100 million, the fund is unique in that it involves a consortium of pharmaceutical companies who initiated a partnership with government and civil society to support research and development for neglected diseases.

It also is the first time the Japanese government, a longtime top-funder of international aid, has made a significant commitment to developing new technologies that target diseases that are mainly a burden on poor countries.

The Fund’s inaugural efforts are financing the work of three non-profit product development partnerships (PDPs) to search for new drug candidates in compound libraries maintained by Japanese pharmaceutical companies and research institutes. The PDPs involved in the work are the Global Alliance for TB Drug Development (TB Alliance), the Medicines for Malaria Venture (MMV), and the Drugs for Neglected Diseases *initiative* (DNDi).

TB Alliance is partnering with Eisai Co., Ltd., Daiichi Sankyo Co., Ltd., Shionogi & Co., Ltd. and Takeda Pharmaceutical Co., Ltd in a search for compounds that show potential to fight deadly, drug-resistant TB strains that are undermining efforts to control the global TB epidemic.

“We applaud the GHIT collaboration for providing a meaningful mechanism to facilitate Japanese companies’ involvement in TB drug research,” said Mel Spigelman, MD, president and CEO of TB

Alliance. “These agreements enable access to the compound libraries of Japan’s top pharma companies, which could help identify tomorrow’s new and improved TB cures.”

MMV is partnering with Eisai Co., Ltd., Daiichi Sankyo Co., Ltd., Takeda Pharmaceutical Co., Ltd., along with the Institute of Microbial Chemistry (BIKAKEN) and Kitasato Institute, to seek out new candidates for treating malaria. There is an urgent need for new malaria treatments as resistance to the most effective drugs now available, artemisinin combination therapies or ACTs, has emerged in Southeast Asia and could spread elsewhere.

“MMV congratulates the Japanese government and Japanese pharmaceutical companies for launching this innovative, cross-sectoral initiative to address diseases of the developing world, such as malaria,” said Dr. David Reddy, PhD, CEO of MMV. “Every minute of every day a child in Africa dies from malaria. Working with the GHIT Fund and Japanese organizations will provide MMV access to novel Japanese compounds, expertise and support, which we hope will open the door to new, breakthrough malaria medicines to help stop this unnecessary loss of life.”

DNDi is partnering with Eisai, Takeda Pharmaceutical Co, the Institute of Microbial Chemistry (BIKAKEN) and Kitasato Institute as part of its effort to find new treatments for three neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) that threaten hundreds of millions of people worldwide: leishmaniasis, Chagas disease and sleeping sickness (Human African trypanosomiasis or HAT). Leishmaniasis, a parasite-borne disease transmitted by sandflies, has a “visceral” form that can kill and a cutaneous form that causes painful, scarring skin ulcers. Chagas disease, a parasite-borne disease transmitted by insects known as “kissing bugs,” kills more people in Latin America than any other parasitic disease. Sleeping sickness is a parasitic disease transmitted by the bite of the tsetse fly. The disease affects mostly poor populations living in remote rural areas of Africa. Untreated, it is usually fatal.

“Japanese companies and research institutes are doing more than just giving us access to their compound libraries to identify new promising drugs to treat patients for neglected diseases. The GHIT Fund partnership provides an opportunity for DNDi to expand collaborations with leading Japanese pharmaceutical companies, research institutions and academia,” said Bernard Pécoul, MD, MPH, executive director, Drugs for Neglected Disease *initiative*. “GHIT is a catalyst for innovation and partnership creation for other governments to follow.”

The aforementioned 13 partnerships to probe the various drug compound libraries emerged from a call for proposals issued by the GHIT Fund in April that was open to all Japanese companies and research institutions and to international PDPs developing new tools to fight infectious disease. Additional agreements are expected from this call for proposals. The GHIT Fund plans to seek another round of proposals that could prompt more Japanese companies and research organizations to offer their compound libraries for screening.

In addition, the GHIT Fund also is seeking grant proposals for partnerships focused on developing new medicines, vaccines or diagnostics that seek to reduce the burden of AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, and a constellation of other debilitating afflictions that disproportionately affect poor people in developing countries. A key requirement is partnership: each proposal must involve both a Japanese partner and an international collaborator already working in global health R&D.

As explained by Kiyoshi Kurokawa, MD, chair of the GHIT Fund board, “The key is for our Fund to provide speed and impact through the facilitation and funding of collaborations.”

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