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University of Cape Town and Novartis collaboration helps African-based scientists tackle African diseases, starting with tuberculosis and malaria

The University of Cape Town (UCT) and the Novartis Institutes for BioMedical Research (NIBR) are working together to bridge the gap between basic science and clinical research to advance innovative medicines that treat African patients.

The collaboration with the University's Drug Discovery and Development Center (H3-D) -- announced today at NIBR headquarters in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA during the *Health Equity Symposium: Science & Medicine in Africa* -- is an important step toward building drug discovery and development capabilities on the African continent and educating the next generation of drug discovery scientists in Africa.

A major goal of this collaboration is to develop an FDA-level clinical study site in Cape Town, South Africa to conduct proof-of-concept studies of new compounds developed at H3-D. Additionally, Novartis will provide H3-D with new chemical starting points for the design of medicines against tuberculosis (TB), and conduct joint programs on malaria research with the Singapore-based Novartis Institute for Tropical Diseases (NITD).

Dr Max Price, the Vice-Chancellor of UCT, said: "UCT is committed to providing a meeting point for Western and African expertise to collaborate on solving problems such as Africa's substantial burden of disease. This partnership with a pharmaceutical giant of Novartis' calibre has the potential to benefit the entire continent."

Located in Cape Town, South Africa, H3-D is the first drug discovery center in Africa with an initial focus on TB and malaria, two top medical needs on the continent. Last year, the first compound developed by H3-D was approved by Medicines for Malaria Venture as a pre-clinical anti-malarial candidate¹. NIBR is the pharmaceutical research organization for Novartis, a global healthcare company, and has ten major research sites around the globe working on many diseases including neglected infectious diseases that disproportionately affect people in the developing world.

Key elements of the H3-D and Novartis collaboration released today include:

- Building capabilities in preclinical and clinical research areas, including a Food and Drug Administration (FDA)-level clinical study site to test new molecular entities, and

establishing research collaborations in malaria and TB;

- Organizing scientific exchange programs between Novartis and H3-D scientists to address unmet medical needs in Africa starting with TB and malaria and knowledge sharing in various disciplines, including pharmacology, computational and medicinal chemistry, and clinical sciences. Programs will include internships, post-doctoral fellowships and sabbaticals both in Cape Town and at Novartis campuses around the world;
- Financial support from the Novartis Research Foundation to fund training programs, fellowship grants and laboratory upgrades at H3-D.

According to H3-D Director Professor Kelly Chibale, "This partnership with Novartis will augment support already provided by the South African government's Department of Science & Technology (DST) and Technology Innovation Agency (TIA) to build drug discovery and development capabilities on the African continent. It will help us address medical needs in South Africa and the continent and build strong translational research capabilities that will create commercial opportunities for the country. Not only will Novartis help with our efforts to build a translational research infrastructure but it will help train a new generation of drug discovery scientists who are familiar with the continent and can most benefit from this expertise."

Three H3-D scientists already have received training in Novartis on the use of drug discovery technology through the internship program at Novartis global headquarters in Basel, Switzerland and several Novartis scientists have taken or are scheduled to take a sabbatical at H3-D.

Background on H3-D

Led by Professor Kelly Chibale, H3-D was founded at UCT in 2010 to train and develop African scientists with skills in integrated modern drug discovery and preclinical development. H3-D involves several UCT faculty and currently employs a 22-person dedicated scientific staff along with graduate students and post-doctoral fellows.

Prior to this, UCT was actively promoting the concept of "signature themes", which formed part of an institutional policy framework for the establishment of interdisciplinary research themes that stimulate high-level collaborative research. This process led to the selection of drug discovery as a signature theme at UCT, formally linking research groups in the faculties of science, health sciences, and engineering to create a new dynamism and collective collaborative mind-set.

The Centre is supported as a high priority by the South African government through the Department of Science and Technology (DST) and Technology Innovation Agency (TIA).

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1. <http://pubs.acs.org/doi/abs/10.1021/jm3001373?prevSearch=malaria%2BUniversity%2Bof%2BCape%2BTown%2B2012&searchHistoryKey=>

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