

WEBSITE

www.who.int1211 GENEVA 27 SWITZERLAND - TELEPHONE: (41) 22.791.21.11 - FAX: (41) 22.791.31.11 - E-MAIL: inf@who.int**Note for the media WHA/2
20 May 2005****WHO ESTABLISHING SMALLPOX VACCINE RESERVE**RESEARCH OPTIONS FOR NEW MEDICINES, VACCINES FOR SMALLPOX NOTED BY
THE WORLD HEALTH ASSEMBLY

Geneva - Today, countries at the World Health Assembly discussed two reports regarding smallpox.

Smallpox, a highly infectious disease which kills about a quarter of the people it infects, was declared eradicated in 1980. The only known samples of the virus are stored in two secure laboratories approved by WHO (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, USA and Vector, Kostovo, Russian Federation). However, the World Health Assembly has recognized the possibility that smallpox could be reintroduced, and since 1996 has had ongoing discussions about measures to prepare for a smallpox emergency.

Today, countries welcomed progress on WHO's work to establish a global smallpox vaccine reserve. This reserve would be used in the event of a smallpox emergency, particularly for those countries that don't have the resources to create their own stockpile.

The reserve plan is twofold: WHO will build its strategic stockpile of smallpox vaccine in Geneva; and, countries are invited to donate and maintain additional stocks pledged to WHO which would be dispatched to where they are most needed in the event of an emergency. Progress on this reserve has already begun, with 2.5 million doses in Geneva, and an additional 31 million doses donated by countries, including 20 million doses from the United States and five million from France.

The World Health Assembly also noted a report which detailed several recommendations for research on the smallpox virus. This research was recommended by the WHO Advisory Committee on Variola Virus Research in November 2004, and is intended to develop better medicines, vaccines and diagnostics for smallpox.

During the World Health Assembly discussions, Member States noted the Director-General's report which contains a recommendation for the WHO Advisory Committee on Variola Virus Research to reconsider its recommendation to allow smallpox virus genes to be implanted into other less virulent types of orthopox viruses.

The Advisory Committee had also recommended a type of research which assists in swift screening of results, and increased safety for the researcher. The recommendation to insert a green fluorescent marker protein in variola virus helps to ensure more rapid screening of antiviral drugs to determine whether they are effective. This is a common method of screening antiviral

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drugs in research involving a range of viruses. In the process, the virus glows green when exposed to an ineffective drug, thus allowing rapid distinction between ineffective and potentially effective drugs against smallpox.

WHO will ensure that any research will only be conducted after detailed proposals have been thoroughly examined on a case-by-case basis by the WHO Advisory Committee on Variola Virus Research, paying particular attention to biosafety and biosecurity issues.

Background on smallpox virus research

In 1996, the World Health Assembly recommended that all remaining stocks of smallpox (variola) virus be destroyed. In May 1999, the World Health Assembly reaffirmed the decision to destroy all stocks of variola virus, but authorized temporary retention of stocks for research purposes. At that time, the World Health Assembly also established an external advisory panel, the WHO Advisory Committee on Variola Virus Research, to develop and oversee a research plan for priority public health-related research using the smallpox virus.

Temporary retention of variola virus stocks was authorized by the World Health Assembly in 2002, on the understanding that steps should be taken to ensure that all approved research would remain outcome-oriented and time-limited and kept under review. The destruction of variola virus stocks was reaffirmed as the agreed goal.

The WHO Advisory Committee on Variola Virus research has continued to oversee and report on the research plan. At its most recent meeting, held in November 2004, the Committee considered the safety and scientific value of proposed experiments that might expedite the development of new antiviral drugs, vaccines, and diagnostic tests. The Committee proposed that research in these areas could be permitted provided special conditions and approvals needed to ensure safe research practices were met.

These recommendations were discussed at this World Health Assembly.

The reports can be found in the World Health Assembly documentation, at http://www.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA58/A58_9-en.pdf and http://www.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA58/A58_10-en.pdf.

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