

MEDIA STATEMENT

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MINISTER NZIMANDE WELCOMES WHO ANNOUNCEMENT ON SOUTH AFRICA'S FIRST HUB FOR mRNA VACCINES NEW TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER PROGRAMME

The Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation Dr Blade Nzimande joins President Cyril Ramaphosa in welcoming the announcement by the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, that South Africa will become the first COVID-19 mRNA vaccine technology transfer hub.

WHO is seeking to expand the capacity of low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) to produce COVID-19 vaccines and scale up manufacturing to increase global access to these critical tools to bring the pandemic under control.

WHO is therefore facilitating the establishment of one (or more, as appropriate) technology transfer hub(s) that will use a hub and spoke model (REF) to transfer a comprehensive technology package and provide appropriate training to interested manufacturers in LMICs.

This initiative will initially prioritize the mRNA-vaccine technology but could expand to other technologies in the future.

The intention is for these hubs to enable the establishment of production process at an industrial or semi-industrial level permitting training and provision of all necessary standard operating procedures for production and quality control.

It is essential that the technology used is either free of intellectual property constraints in LMICs, or that such rights are made available to the technology hub and the future recipients of the technology through non-exclusive licenses to produce, export and distribute the COVID-19 vaccine in LMICs, including through the COVAX facility.

The programme aims to kickstart Africa's vaccines industry and boost the continent's pandemic preparedness.

During an announcement earlier today, Dr Tedros said the World Health Organization and its COVAX partners were working with a South African consortium comprising Biovac, Afrigen Biologics and Vaccines, a network of universities and the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to establish the first COVID-19 messenger RNA (mRNA) vaccine technology transfer hub.

South African biotechnology company Afrigen, in partnership with Biovac (a public-private partnership vaccine manufacturing initiative), will be the first recipients of

cutting-edge mRNA vaccine know-how under a new technology transfer programme.

Afrigen Biologics and Vaccines is a Cape Town-based biotechnology company strategically directed, supported and capitalised by the pan-African Avacare Health Group and South Africa's Industrial Development Corporation.

It operates the first ever adjuvant production and formulation technology centre on the African continent and focuses on product development, bulk adjuvant manufacturing, and the supply and distribution of key biologicals to address unmet healthcare needs.

Over the coming weeks, the partners will negotiate details with the South Africa government and public and private partners, inside the country and from around the world.

"This is great news, particularly for Africa, which has the least access to vaccines," said Dr Tedros.

"COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of local production to address health emergencies, strengthen regional health security and expand sustainable access to health products," added Dr Tedros.

Speaking at the announcement of the technology transfer agreement, President Ramaphosa emphasised the urgent need for an African vaccines industry.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the full extent of the vaccine gap between developed and developing economies, and how that gap can severely undermine global health security. This landmark initiative is a major advance in the international effort to build vaccine development and manufacturing capacity that will put Africa on a path to self determination. South Africa welcomes the opportunity to host a vaccine technology transfer hub and to build on the capacity and expertise that already exists on the continent to contribute to this effort," said President Ramaphosa.

South Africa is therefore well positioned to make a significant contribution to the implementation of the shared vision of the WHO, African Union and Africa CDC to create a sustainable vaccine supply and pandemic preparedness on the continent.

"This is a significant day for science in Africa, and acknowledges the scientific abilities and expertise at our universities. The capabilities have been built up through steady investment in research and development in South Africa and are an integral part of the implementation of our national Bioeconomy Strategy. The DSI is proud to be associated with the initiative," said Minister Nzimande.

The Minister added that the tech transfer hub was a strong signal of South Africa's positioning as a manufacturing hub on the continent, and one among many in developing countries. In the process, South Africa's facilities would be further strengthened.

"The technology transfer agreement recognises South Africa's world-class research capacity and the significant role local scientists played in the development of COVID-19 vaccines," said Afrigen Managing Director, Prof. Petro Terblanche.

"It also speaks of Afrigen's commitment to share our knowledge with other low and middle-income countries at a time when vaccine inequity is a global health threat."

Scientists used mRNA technology to develop the first COVID-19 vaccines in record time. Afrigen and its consortium partners will initially focus on developing new COVID-19 vaccines that are better suited to local strains and circumstances. However, the mRNA platform is a powerful new technology that could be applied in several other disease areas, including illnesses that disproportionately affect the African continent.

While Afrigen will lead the development of new vaccines and therapeutics, Biovac (which includes government as a shareholder, through the DSI), will be responsible for scaling up manufacturing. Since its establishment, Biovac has established world-class facilities, which allowed it to secure high-profile technology transfers from two large international pharmaceutical companies. Biovac's current facility can produce more than 50 million vaccine doses.

"Biovac has built a world-class vaccine facility over the past decade, and mRNA technology will amplify those investments to the benefit of patients across Africa," said Biovac Chief Executive Officer, Dr Morena Makhoana.

The Afrigen consortium includes several of South Africa's leading experts and academic institutions, such as the South African Medical Research Council, the University of the Witwatersrand, North-West University, the National Institute of Communicable Diseases, and the newly established Centre for Epidemiological Research and Innovation. The academic partners will fulfil various roles in the development of vaccines and training in the mRNA technology.

Background information on companies involved

About Biovac

Biovac was established to revive local human vaccine production in Southern Africa. Alongside the development of modern facilities, the company has secured high-profile technology transfers from international pharmaceutical companies Pfizer and Sanofi Pasteur. The company also sources and supplies a comprehensive range of vaccines required by the Department of Health, including paediatric and COVID-19 vaccines, supplying over 15 million doses of vaccines per year (excluding COVID-19 vaccines), across South Africa and in neighbouring countries.

About Afrigen

Afrigen Biologics and Vaccines is a Cape Town-based biotechnology company strategically directed, supported and capitalised by Avacare Health Group and the Industrial Development Corporation (IDC) of South Africa. It was founded in 2014 by the IDC and the Infectious Diseases Research Institute (IDRI) in Seattle. Avacare

Health acquired a 51% shareholding of Afrigen in 2018 and constructed its world-class facility in Cape Town. Afrigen focuses on product development, bulk adjuvant manufacturing, and the supply and distribution of key biologicals to address unmet healthcare needs. Through international partnerships and local capacity building, Afrigen has established the first ever adjuvant production and formulation technology centre on the African continent.

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