

Rotavirus vaccine demonstration to help accelerate progress against a leading killer of children

Press release

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Seattle and Geneva, September 22, 2006—The GAVI Alliance and PATH hail today's announcement by the Government of Nicaragua and Merck & Co., Inc. on their plans to conduct a demonstration rotavirus vaccine program in Nicaragua. This vaccine's introduction in a developing country right on the heels of its approval in the developed world is a major milestone for children's health.

Rotavirus gastroenteritis is one of the leading causes of death among children under age five, causing approximately 600,000 deaths and 2 million hospitalizations from diarrhea and dehydration each year. Greater than 85 percent of those who die from rotavirus are young children in developing countries where access to medical care, including rehydration methods, is limited.

The project announced today in New York will provide free doses of ROTATEQ®, Merck's three-dose oral rotavirus vaccine, to all infants in Nicaragua for the next three years. Merck will also provide technical assistance during the duration of the project.

“Rotavirus infects nearly every child in the world before age five, but is particularly devastating in developing countries,” said Dr. Julian Lob-Levyt, executive secretary of the Geneva-based GAVI Alliance. “This demonstration project is a significant step towards global use of rotavirus vaccines, which have the potential to save hundreds of thousands of lives, and help the world achieve the Millennium Development Goals. It is also a good illustration of what can be achieved by combining and integrating political will with private resources and partner support to deliver the outcomes needed to reach the health MDGs.”

Rotavirus poses an exception to typical diarrheal disease management rules. While improved access to clean water and better sanitation and hygiene practices are vital to preventing most diarrheal diseases, they have done little to disrupt rotavirus infection, as evidenced by its global incidence. For this reason, the global health community has made the introduction of rotavirus vaccines a priority.

“Nicaragua is a leader in the worldwide effort to accelerate availability of rotavirus vaccines to low-income countries far faster than previous vaccines,” said Dr. John Wecker, director of the PATH Rotavirus Vaccine Program, funded by the GAVI

Alliance. “This project will spotlight the value of rotavirus vaccines in developing countries.”

PATH is an international, nonprofit organization that creates sustainable, culturally relevant solutions that enable communities worldwide to break longstanding cycles of poor health. By collaborating with diverse public- and private-sector partners, PATH helps provide appropriate health technologies and vital strategies that change the way people think and act.

With funding from the GAVI Alliance and the GAVI Fund, PATH established the Rotavirus Vaccine Program (RVP) in 2003. Along with its strategic partners, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), RVP developing a new model for accelerated vaccine introduction. By demonstrating to governments the impact of the disease and the promise of a vaccine, RVP will help countries make informed decisions about the use of rotavirus vaccines.

The GAVI Alliance

An alliance of all the major stakeholders in immunisation, the GAVI Alliance includes among its partners developing country and donor governments, the World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, the World Bank, the vaccine industry in both industrialised and developing countries, research and technical agencies, NGOs, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. It is estimated that more than 1.7 million early deaths will have been prevented as a result of support by GAVI up to the end of 2005.

GAVI's efforts are critical to achieving the Millennium Development Goal on child health, which calls for reducing childhood mortality by two-thirds by 2015. Of the more than 10 million children who die before reaching their fifth birthday every year, 2.5 million die from diseases that could be prevented with currently available or new vaccines.