Media Release

South Africa’s Stellenbosch University and Unitaid sign US$ 18.9 million grant agreement to develop child-friendly treatments and preventive therapy against multidrug-resistant tuberculosis (TB)

Thursday, 31 October, 2019 (Paris, France; Hyderabad, India) – Stellenbosch University and Unitaid have signed a US$ 18.9 million grant agreement to develop child-friendly treatments and preventive therapy for treating multidrug-resistant TB in children. The agreement was announced today at the 50th Union World Conference on Lung Health (WCOLH), taking place this week in Hyderabad, India. The conference is convened by the International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease (The Union).

More than 95% of children with MDR-TB do not currently receive treatment. For those who do, the treatment regimens are long, bad-tasting, toxic, and often cause severe side effects such as irreversible hearing loss. Children are typically treated mostly with adult tablets that need to be crushed.

The Better Evidence and Formulations for Improved MDR-TB Treatment for Children (BENEFIT Kids) project, will increase access to quality-assured MDR-TB medicines that are adapted to children by bringing child-friendly treatment formulations and preventive therapies that taste better and are appropriate for children; strengthen the evidence on optimal dosing, safety, efficacy, acceptability and costs of using these regimens; and shaping the market for better child-friendly formulations.

The project will be implemented in three countries: South Africa, India and the Philippines. Stellenbosch University will work with partners TB Alliance, University of California San Francisco, De La Salle University Medical Center, Johns Hopkins University, BJ Medical College, Uppsala University and Chiang Mai University.

“Children have the same rights to health that adults do, and yet children with drug-resistant TB are widely neglected,” said José Luis Castro, Executive Director of the International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease. “Every child affected by TB has a right to receive care that is entirely appropriate for them.”

The Union World Conference is the world’s largest gathering of clinicians, policy makers, public health managers, researchers and advocates working to end the suffering caused by lung disease, with a focus specifically on the challenges faced by low- and middle-income countries. Some 3,500 delegates from over 80 countries are attending the event which was yesterday inaugurated by The Honourable Vice-President of India, Shri M. Venkaiah Naidu, at the Opening Ceremony. Film and television actress Claire Forlani ambassador for The Union, Dr Ren Minghui, Assistant Director-General at the World Health Organization, senior representatives of the State of Telangana, and Nandita Venkatesan, a TB survivor also addressed delegates at the ceremony.
Today’s press conference highlighted two abstracts being presented at the 50th Union World Conference on Lung Health 2019. (Note: Press summaries are based on abstracts - final data presented at the conference may change).

**Novel candidate molecular markers for TB infection identified.**

The identification of TB biomarkers—reliable, measurable changes within the human body that indicate presence of TB infection or disease—is a key priority for the research and development of new TB diagnostics.

Presenter Yan Li, of the Jiangsu Provincial Center for Disease Prevention and Control, reported that his team has identified ten long noncoding RNAs (lncRNAs) within the MAPK signal pathways that were differentially expressed in TB patients. Increasing evidence shows that lncRNAs have multiple roles in the body’s immune response, but their roles in response to TB infection have not yet been described. The identification of a “signature” pattern of changes in ten lncRNAs within the MAPK pathway provides a new insight into the mechanisms of TB infection and identifies a potential target for TB treatment.

**Abstract:** Association between long non-coding RNAs (lncRNAs) of the MAPK Signal Pathway and Pulmonary Tuberculosis (OA-05-337-31)

**Session:** Oral Abstract, 31st October, 16:00h-17:30, Hall 1

Critical to finding the millions of people with TB who go without diagnosis and treatment every year is a strategy known as “active case finding” (ACF) where health workers pro-actively seek out people who have been exposed to TB and need evaluation and appropriate care.

T. Gachie of the Zambia AIDS Related Tuberculosis Project (Zambart) reported on the results of a study investigating the effectiveness of an ACF approach where Community HIV-care Providers (CHiPs) visited all households within a community to offer HIV testing and TB symptom screening. Those who reported symptoms of TB, CHiPs collected sputum samples for testing and follow-up care. In three rounds of screening, 78.7%, 79% and 79.9% of people diagnosed with TB began treatment, with the yield being approximately twice as high for men than women, showing that household-based, community-wide universal HIV testing and TB screening in high-HIV prevalence settings can improve TB detection within communities at greatest risk of TB.
Abstract: Outcomes of household-based, community TB case finding from the HPTN 071 (PopART) study in Zambia (OA-12-388-01)

Session: Oral Abstract, 1st November, 10:30h-12:00, Hall 6

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About the 50th Union World Conference on Lung Health

The Union World Conference on Lung Health, convened by the International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease (The Union), is the world’s largest gathering of clinicians and public health workers, health programme managers, policymakers, researchers and advocates working to end the suffering caused by lung disease, with a focus specifically on the challenges faced by low-and lower-middle income populations. Of the 10 million people who die each year from lung diseases, some 80 percent live in these resource-limited settings.

Organising international conferences on TB and related subjects has been a core activity of The Union since its founding in 1920.

Twitter: @UnionConference

About the International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease (The Union)

The Union was founded in 1920 and is the world’s first global health organisation. We are a global leader in ending TB, we fight the tobacco industry, and we solve key problems in treating major diseases. We use science to design the best treatments and policies for the most pressing public health challenges affecting people living in poverty around the world. The Unions members, staff and consultants operate in more than 140 countries and embody our core values of accountability, independence, quality and solidarity.

Twitter: @TheUnion_TBLH
About the Union South-East Asia (USEA)

USEA provides public health expertise to the region’s governments, civil society, corporations and international agencies on tuberculosis (TB) control and tobacco control; it also conducts operational research, capacity-building programmes and grant-monitoring services.