

J&J teams up with African scientists to find new drugs to address antimicrobial resistance

A new partnership between African scientists and pharmaceutical company Johnson & Johnson (J&J), aimed at finding solutions to antimicrobial resistance (AMR), has just been launched in South Africa.



Source: Supplied. H3D founder and scientist, Professor Kelly Chibale, at UCT's H3D laboratory. He will be heading an initiative with H3D scientists to develop antibiotics that will address antimicrobial resistance.

The J&J satellite centre for global health discovery, housed at the University of Cape Town (UCT)'s Holistic Drug Discovery and Development (H3D) centre, will ensure that African scientists get mentorship from J&J scientists while they tackle one of the world's greatest public-health challenges.

The centre will focus on developing precision antibiotics to treat multidrug-resistant Gram-negative bacteria (MDR-GNB).

It will be led by H3D founder and renowned scientist Professor Kelly Chibale, who has been working with J&J since 2016.

"We have a strong history of building drug-development capacity together on the African continent," said Chibale. "This new development will help us to engage with that capability and support the innovation ecosystem to thrive and grow."

J&J's Dr Ruxandra Draghia-Akli said that "investing to increase the capacity of the innovation ecosystem in Africa is critical to strengthening the research and development (R&D) pipeline for entrenched and emerging global health challenges".



COVID-19

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“By leveraging the unique strengths of H3D and the J&J centres, we can cultivate the talent and capacity needed to drive innovation in the global fight against AMR,” added Draghia-Akli, who is head of Global Put Health R&D at J&J’s Janssen Research & Development.

The partnership will ensure that any pre-clinical drug candidates will align with South African public-health needs and “boost the H3D’s AMR drug discovery portfolio, which will in turn attract additional projects and investments to the region”, according to H3D.

It will also support the efforts of the South African Medical Research Council to set up a national antimicrobial screening platform at H3D, which is co-ordinating and accelerating the discovery of novel starting points for AMR drug-discovery research in South Africa.



H3D scientists take their J&J counterparts on a tour of their Cape Town laboratory.

Second in the world

The Cape Town centre is only the second such initiative to be set up globally, following the launch of a similar satellite centre at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) in July 2021. That centre is focusing on developing next-generation drug regimens that are capable of treating all forms of tuberculosis (TB). These medicines are also needed to counter the rising threat of AMR, with a proliferation of drug-resistant forms of TB emerging worldwide.

Announcing the LSHTM centre, J&J said that “the response to the Covid-19 pandemic has powerfully demonstrated both the importance of science, and that scientific advances do not reach all those who need them quickly”.

The global centres are the company's attempt to both encourage R&D and address inequity. It added: "Unless these inequities are addressed and new, equitably accessible solutions are developed, millions of people living in vulnerable and underserved communities around the world will be prevented from living healthy lives."

Welcoming the launch, the university's vice-chancellor, Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng, said: "While South Africa's innovations have positioned the country as a key player in global collaborations around Covid-19 vaccines, the focus on other diseases remains narrow. South Africa needs to serve the continent by proactively developing the skills to address global health issues such as AMR. UCT is proud to be leading the way through H3D."

AMR was responsible for an estimated 1.5 million deaths in 2020 and is one of the World Health Organization's top 10 global health threats. Scientists warn that, unless AMR is addressed, its effect could be worse than the Covid-19 pandemic as it can transform easily treated diseases into deadly killers by rendering medicines ineffective.

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