TOMORROW, May 18, 2015, is HIV Vaccine Awareness Day (HVAD 2015). This day is observed annually to raise world awareness of the importance and current state of HIV vaccine research and development. It also gives us an opportunity to recognize and acknowledge the efforts of those who work in the field of HIV vaccine research. These are the researchers, scientists, health workers, and volunteers who contribute to the advancement of HIV vaccine research.

In Zambia, the observance of HVAD in the last two years has been absent or at the very least rather quiet. This column was the only ‘activity’ drawing Zambian attention to HVAD in 2013 and 2014. This is perhaps understandable because for a number of years now, there has been no HIV vaccine research activity in Zambia, due partly because Zambia’s HIV research environment has not been the friendliest in recent years. In the HVAD commemorative column in 2013, repeated in 2014’s, we wrote: “In Zambia though, we also need to use the occasion of HIV Vaccine Awareness Day to do some serious introspection into how we view and treat biomedical research in general. Ambiguity and ambivalence about biomedical research reigns at all levels. At the regulatory levels where necessary approvals are required to be made before research is carried out, bureaucratic procrastination has often frustrated important research – even where Zambia is part of multi-centered studies already approved and started in other countries in the region. Sometimes, the lack of a position of public opinion instead of educating and leading it – resulting in rejection of useful research. At the ‘public’ level, the ambivalence is palpable and loud. When evidence is quoted from research done elsewhere (even in neighboring countries), people have called for the results to be replicated in Zambia before the results can be accepted. It happened with the introduction of male circumcision for HIV prevention, and is being heard again now with the introduction of HPV Vaccine for the prevention of cervical cancer. Lack of understanding of interpretation of research methods and results in a microbicide trial in Mazabuka a few years ago is still rippling in Zambia and beyond. No microbicide research is going on now in Zambia. We must raise biomedical research awareness and acceptability.” Fortunately, the Zambian research environment should change with the recent enactment of the National Health Research Act 2013, and the announcement in recent weeks of names of people in one of the bodies under this Act.

Reflecting on AIDS

Dr. Manasseh Phiri

In fact, the news is that the HIV prevention world is that a large trial involving other countries within our region. This is very welcome news that should be received and embraced by all – the political leadership, policy makers, civil society, the traditional leadership, the general public and the communities in and out of the areas where these trials will take place.

The importance of HIV vaccine trials, and therefore the worldwide commemoration of HIV Vaccine Awareness Day, cannot be overstated. The search for an effective and efficacious HIV vaccine must go on because the HIV and AIDS epidemic is far from over. New infections continue even though they may be reducing. There are still more people who do not know their HIV status and are spreading the virus without knowing it than those who have been tested and know. HIV treatment is very effective but extremely costly. Even though it is free to those who receive it – it is costly to those who procure and distribute it to our people on our behalf. Therefore, vaccine research must go on alongside research in other biomedical prevention tools such as microbicides. Vaccines have proved most effective in other epidemics in world history.

An HIV vaccine is important and must be found because as we have noted and stated before, “all the current HIV prevention strategies (abstinence, being faithful, condoming, circumcising, ART etc.) that have been thrown at this virus since the beginning of the epidemic” have not worked to eradicate HIV and AIDS because human behaviour change is difficult. African scientists in other countries on our continent are working day and night, diligently and knowledgeably alongside their colleagues from other parts of the world, on vaccine and other prevention research. Zambian scientists, researchers and participants must be there too.

So, let us commemorate world HIV Vaccine Awareness Day tomorrow by committing ourselves to accepting vaccine research wholeheartedly as it comes back to Zambia in the next few months. Let us pay tribute, rather than suspicion and suspicion, to the region of scientists, researchers, research subjects, and all others working in HIV vaccine research worldwide. Let us commit to make this HVAD the turning point in creating a Zambia that embraces and takes part in research for the betterment of our lives.

Each one of us has been touched in one way or another by this epidemic. It is therefore our epidemic and we must contribute and take part towards achieving its end.

Let us commit that come HVAD next year, we in Zambia shall also hold commemorative events and activities – because we will have joined the rest of the world in the search for an HIV vaccine to end AIDS.

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